

INTERNATIONAL LIVING

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Finally, Life Decisions Your Mother Would Approve



Travel buddies are a rare and special breed. You know the ones—up for Cancún or Kolkata on a moment's notice. As long as it's an adventure—and it's with you.

My mother is one of my favorite travel buddies. Still a fountain of energy at 78, her itineraries are relentlessly ambitious. Right now, she's planning our upcoming mother-daughter trip to France. The printout of what we'll do and see in one week is 16 pages long. (I predict we'll check off somewhere between three and six.)

What's wonderful about Mom is she's willing to abandon the plan at a moment's notice. For her, contemplating the endless possibilities of a trip abroad is *almost* as much fun as the trip itself.

May is for celebrating moms, and with it, we aim to bring you endless possibilities for exploring with her... like escapades to Tokyo and Marrakesh and Bali. But if your idea of a Mother's Day getaway is traveling solo—indulging in Turkish spas to your heart's content—we've got insider tips for that, too.

Speaking of solo travelers, IL's intrepid editor Jessica Ramesch ventured all the way

to Uruguay to see what all the fuss is about... and whether it could match the allure of neighboring Argentina. As you'll see, she came home with a new love—one her mother would approve of.

If you prefer traveling with pets than humans, we get it. But pet travel gets complicated and expensive. Learn how one couple is seeing the world with a menagerie of animals—and saving a bundle while they're at it.

We have a wealth of live-abroad discoveries for you, too. Read about a modern "Swiss Family Robinson" uprooted to a tiny Costa Rican paradise... and a couple who motorbiked their way across 30-plus Mexican towns before they found their Goldilocks spot.

And for our francophiles: Ronan McMahon's found a way you can retire to the South of France like a Prince of Monaco... for a fraction of the cost.

Stephanie Reed, Editor-in-Chief

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TECH TIPS

Don't Go Thirsty in Rome

Rome is known for its fountains. Not just the more famous stone-carved fountains like the **Trevi Fountain** or **Fountain of the Moor**, but also its *nasoni*—drinking fountains called *nasoni*, offering cold, fresh, potable water.

Soaring temperatures, a lack of natural shade, and the cost of tap water at restaurants make these a commodity. Rome is home to roughly 2,500 of these water fountains, affectionately called *nasone* (the plural is *nasoni*), meaning “big nose,” owing to their curved spout resembling a hooked nose.

These cast-iron cylindrical-shaped fountains are dotted all over the city—with about a tenth of them in the historic center.

An initiative first started in 1874 by then-mayor Luigi Pianciani as a way to bring fresh drinking water to the people of Rome for free, these continuously-flowing fountains have become a part of Rome's heritage. Most of the *nasoni* have a small hole above the spout. By plugging up the main spout with a finger, you can push the water out through the little hole, creating a more manageable arc of water to fill up your water bottle from.

While there are many *nasone*, they can still be tricky to find, especially in newer neighborhoods. That's why Rome's water company has created an app, [ACEA Waidy Wow](#), which has the locations of the *nasone* on a map, including new *nasone* that offer free still or sparkling water at areas like the Colosseum.

Confusingly, some of Rome's beautiful fountains (such as the **Fontana della Barcaccia** at the foot of the **Spanish Steps**) are also potable, or have potable water spouts attached to them—while others (like the **Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi** in **Piazza Navona** or the Trevi Fountain) are not.

You'll get a fine for drinking from the latter. So in the dead of summer, it's better to find a *nasone* to drink from. And if you aren't sure which fountains are potable and which aren't, just remember: do as the Romans do. —*Nathaniel Mellor*



“For a unique cherry blossom experience, row in the moat surrounding Tokyo's Imperial Palace.”

EXPERIENCES

See the Marvel That Inspired Samurai on Their Deathbeds

In Japan, cherry blossom season is a time to celebrate—and reflect on the transience of beauty and life.

Beautiful and fragile, Japan's national flower lasts just a week or two before falling to the earth. In the 15th and 16th centuries, ill, injured, or sentenced-to-death samurai often wrote poetry laden with *sakura* (flowering cherry trees) motifs.

Today, *hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) is an opportunity for socialization and relaxation. *Sakura* can be seen almost everywhere: in mountain ranges, suburbs, and major cities. Couples, clubs, classmates, and coworkers plan get-togethers as traditional as Thanksgiving gatherings. Junior employees are sent to parks to find and save the best locations for company gatherings.

It's April in **Nagoya City**, where almost 800 blossoming *sakura* stand in **Tsuruma Park**. Petals descend like snowflakes on the small parties below—including one hosted by my friends. I join them on blankets beneath a flower-laden tree. One fires up a tiny *hibachi* (charcoal grill), and the aroma of grilled meat skewers replaces flower scents.

They teach me the importance of cherry blossoms in Japanese culture while

sharing beer, sake, dried squid, and *sakura mochi* (rice cake wrapped in a pickled cherry leaf).

Meteorologists display maps of the *sakura* front spreading across Japan, starting in warm southern **Okinawa** in January and concluding in **Hokkaido**, the country's northernmost prefecture, in May.

Among urban *sakura*-viewing locations, **Chidorigafuchi Park** stands out because of its beauty and historic setting. Hundreds of cherry trees line the park's moat circling Japan's **Imperial Palace in Tokyo**. The park includes the moat and a walkway alongside it.

For a unique experience, rent a boat and row beneath branches overhanging the waterway, which turns pink with millions of floating petals through the last days of March into the early days of April. The park is a 30-minute walk from Tokyo Station.

For a more secluded *hanami* experience, visit picturesque, rural **Mt. Yoshino** in **Nara Prefecture** (two hours south of Kyoto).

Amidst ancient shrines and temples, locals planted 30,000 cherry trees of numerous varieties, creating a mountain splashed with multiple hues of pink and white. —*Greg Goodmacher*

REPORTING ON THE GROUND

Celebrate With Pope Francis at Notre Dame Cathedral's Reopening

This December, you can be a part of history in the making.

France has announced plans for the reopening of **Notre Dame Cathedral**, five years after fire ravaged the beloved Parisian landmark and toppled its iconic spire.

Since 2019, I've watched the scaffold silhouette evolve, eventually rising more than 300 feet in the sky. From street level, it looks a bit like an ant farm, with expert workers weaving through the maze to restore the monument from bottom to top.

I imagine a similar bustling scene in 1160, when construction of the cathedral began under King Louis VII and Bishop Maurice de Sully and continued for more than 100 years... And then again during the restoration of Notre Dame in the mid-1800s by architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, inspired in no small part by Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Now, it's nearly time to reveal the latest restoration efforts.

The inauguration begins December 7, 2024 with the official handover from the State to the Catholic Church, the organ awakening, and prayers. The day after is the first mass—Pope Francis is on the guest list—kicking off a week-long celebration from December 8 to 15, when the cathedral is expected to reopen to the

public.

Ahead of the inauguration, *tout le monde* is invited to a two-week procession to return the 14th-century *Notre Dame de Paris* statue from nearby **Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois Church** to the cathedral (specific details have not been revealed yet).

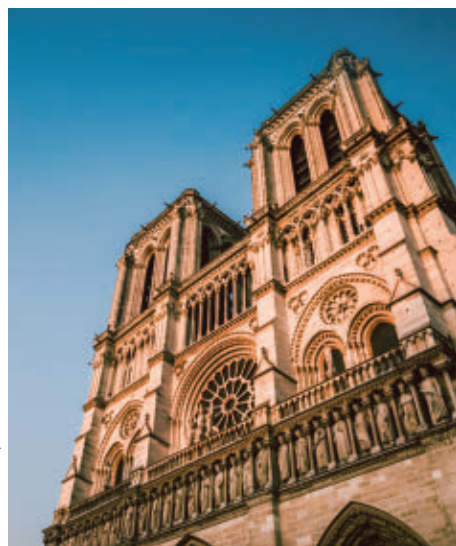
Right next door at the **Hôtel Dieu**, France's oldest hospital, we'll soon be getting a new museum showcasing the history and art of Notre Dame and commemorating the restoration effort. The museum will include architect Viollet-le-Duc's 1859 stained glass windows and the original golden rooster, symbolizing Christ's resurrection, that sat atop the spire.

Like its predecessor, the new five-foot-tall rooster houses relics of St. Denis, St. Geneviève, and a purported fragment of Christ's crown of thorns. It now also contains a tube with 2,000 names of contributors to the reconstruction, including some 500 craftspeople following in the footsteps of Middle Ages artisans. A [free exhibition now on view](#) next to Notre Dame spotlights their expertise and the materials and techniques required to bring the cathedral back to life, as does an open-air exhibit near the construction area.

Meanwhile the rebuilt spire replicates Viollet-le-Duc's 315-foot, 19th-century design with the same oak frame covered in lead. There are present-day touches: The spire is adorned with wooden gargoyles, arches, and quatrefoils carved from some of the 2,000 oak trees used in the restoration—sourced from the same forests around France as the original. Etched into the spire frame is the name of General Jean-Louis Georgelin, appointed to oversee the operation, who died unexpectedly in 2023.

There's also a competition for artists to design new stained-glass windows for the south-facing chapels, leaving a 21st-century mark for the ages.

If you can't make the trip this December, the reopening celebration stretches until June 8, 2025, while the full restoration could last until 2028. Find the latest restoration news [here](#). —Maria Krasinski



Notre Dame Cathedral is getting a facelift—and you're invited to celebrate.



A SOLUTION TO A COMMON EXPAT WORRY

Jeff D. Opdyke

"What's your *physical* address in America?"

It's a question that unnerves almost anyone who lives or works abroad.

Without a doubt, proving you have a physical address in the US is the most annoying aspect of life abroad. If you don't have one, you risk running afoul of banks, brokerage firms, and other financial institutions that demand a real residential address—not a mail drop—to meet rules imposed by the 9/11-era Patriot Act.

Financial-services companies can lock down your account, or limit your ability to do anything useful, like trade stocks or move money around.

To address the problem, [VirtualPost-Mail.com](#) has come up with an ingenious solution for those who don't have friends and family in the States whose address can be "borrowed." VPM, as the company's known, offers TruResidence: a \$200 per month service that gives you an address at a condo in a very real, occupied residential tower near the Las Vegas airport.

The service isn't cheap, but when you have no other way to prove a physical residential address in America, TruResidence is about the best option on the market. For an extra fee, you can also obtain a lease agreement proving the Vegas tower is your home address.



PLACES

Isparta: Lavender Fields and Hiking Trails in “Turkey’s Provence”

When you think of lavender, you likely conjure up the undulating purple fields synonymous with Provence, France. As did I—until I stumbled upon the idyllic **Kuyucak** village in Turkey’s **Isparta** province, an hour’s flight from Istanbul.

Though this charming village is home to only a few hundred residents, Kuyucak is well-known within Turkey and hosts thousands of annual visitors (mostly from Eurasian countries) for its lavender season.

In addition to its lavender fields, the larger Isparta province is also known for its cherry blossoms and roses. (Locals call it Turkey’s “rose garden.”) I recommend timing your visit in the summer so you can

enjoy the end of rose season and the commencement of lavender season. You can even pick the roses. (I like to steam the petals in distilled water to make gifts of antioxidant-rich rose water.) The annual Lavender Fest, with guided tours and lavender-infused culinary delights, takes place in July.

Access is free. Most visitors spend hours walking around the scenic fragrant fields and enjoying a lavender tea while perusing the various local products on display at cafes and farm stands.

The area provides nature lovers and hikers with plentiful trails and opportunities to enjoy the local flora and fauna. The region is also known for its warm

hospitality and local gastronomy, so while there, try hearty vegetable dishes and *gozleme*, a Turkish-style stuffed pancake, to enjoy the region’s authentic flavors.

Isparta city is less than 30 miles from Kuyucak. Although renting a car is convenient for exploration, there are regular minibuses and taxi options between Isparta city and Kuyucak. (Note that there are many Turkish towns called Kuyucak; this one is located in the Keciobur district.)

I recommend staying at [Lavanta Villa](#), where Gulberg Goydag and her English-speaking husband host visitors and are happy to help with logistics.

—Sophia Elan

SELAMAT MAKAN

The Best “Breakfast” Dish You’ve Never Tried

Visitors from as far as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Bangkok come to Malaysia for its uniquely multinational food. In fact, visitors call Malaysia “the 10-pound holiday.”

Nasi lemak is the national dish: coconut-infused rice is accompanied by fiery shrimp paste, delicate calamari or chicken that falls off the bone, and the delightful crunch of peanuts and anchovies.

Malaysians traditionally have the dish for breakfast. But thankfully, *nasi lemak* can be found on the menu for lunch and dinner, too. My absolute favorite café in **Penang** for *nasi lemak* is **Muntri Mews** in **Muntri Lane**. This is their recipe. I’ve tried making it at home. It’s delicious and travels well.



Ingredients

- 2 cups jasmine rice
- 400g (14 oz) coconut milk
- 1 lemongrass stalk
- fried peanuts, to serve
- hard boiled eggs, halved, to serve
- sliced cucumber, to serve
- fried chicken (optional)
- fried calamari (optional)
- 10 dried long red chilies
- 2 fresh long red chilies
- 2 red shallots, roughly chopped
- 1 garlic clove, chopped
- 1 tsp shrimp paste
- ¼ cup peanut oil
- 1 cup dried anchovies
- 1 small red onion, sliced onto rings
- 1 tbsp brown sugar
- 1 tbsp tamarind puree

Coconut Rice:

- In a saucepan, combine rice, coconut milk, and lemongrass. Spread evenly and add water until it reaches your first knuckle when touching the rice.
- Simmer over medium-high heat until most liquid evaporates.
- Cover with a lid, reduce heat to low, and cook for another two minutes.
- Turn off heat and cover for 10 minutes

Spicy Shrimp Paste:

- Soak dried chilies in hot water for 15 minutes to soften, then drain.
- In a small food processor, blend soaked chilies, fresh chili, shallots, garlic, and shrimp paste until coarse.

Anchovy Stirfry:

- Heat oil in a pan over high heat. Cook anchovies until crispy, then remove with a slotted spoon.
- Add onion and cook for five minutes, then transfer to the plate with anchovies.
- Reduce heat, add chili mixture, and cook until red oil rises.
- Stir in sugar, tamarind, and 2 tbsp of chili-soaking liquid, then simmer for five minutes.
- Add back anchovies and onion, transfer to a bowl.

To Serve:

Fluff up coconut rice with a fork, then serve rice with spicy shrimp paste, anchovy stirfry, peanuts, egg, cucumber, and fried chicken or calamari.

Enjoy—or, as they say in Malaysia, *selamat makan*.

—Keith Hockton

Retire in the South of France for Less... and Where to Get Home Financing in Latin America

Ronan
McMahon



■ **John H. says:** I'm looking to buy a retirement home in the South of France. Where do you recommend?

■ **Ronan says:** The South of France is one of Europe's most evocative destinations. It's where you'll find the French Riviera, stunning Mediterranean beaches, and all the luxury and glamour of Cannes and Saint-Tropez. These are some of the most prestigious areas to live or vacation in Europe, and they come with real estate price tags to match.

But there is another South of France where you can find much of what makes the French Riviera special, at a fraction of the price. I'm talking about the [Languedoc](#). Situated to the west of the French Riviera, bordering Spain, the Languedoc region is sometimes called "the real South of France" or "poor man's Provence." But this is no poor relation.

Big Cities and Mediterranean Beaches in the Languedoc

The Languedoc has been high on my watchlist for years. I looked closely at buying a European base for myself there before settling on Portugal's Silver Coast. This region boasts sun-drenched Mediterranean beaches, wild mountain ranges, dramatic gorges, stunning hill towns, and big cities like **Perpignan** and **Montpellier** (one of my [top 10 places](#) in the world to buy real estate in 2024).

You'll also enjoy 300 days of sunshine a year, classic French restaurants, farmers markets selling fresh seasonal produce, charming medieval villages, and a countryside overflowing with vineyards and olive groves. And it's the biggest wine-producing region in France, accounting for 5% of global wine production. The Languedoc is a popular second home and vacation destination, but without the same volume of tourists you'll find in Provence, to the east.

In recent years, there has been a

significant uptick in wealthier folks arriving here from Paris and other French cities, partly spurred on by the pandemic and the desire for more space. Nevertheless, this region is still quieter and more affordable than Provence. In fact, it offers some of the best-value real estate in the entire country. Find the right property in the Languedoc and you could make decent rental income too, when you're not enjoying yourself there.

Earlier this year, I sent a member of my scouting team to explore the Languedoc, and he uncovered opportunities like a 25-acre vineyard for €86,000... a turnkey home with a roof terrace in a charming French village for €220,000... an off-grid house with its own saltwater pool and a potential gross rental yield of 11%... and a seven-bed "dream house" with a terrace and glorious riverside views for €388,000.

Find Your Dream Home

I prepared a report about France for readers of my new email newsletter, *Overseas Dream Home*. This is where I share the latest boots-on-the-ground research from me and my team. You can read the full France scouting report [here](#). Some of these listings may no longer be active, but they'll give you an excellent flavor of the kinds of properties and price tags you'll find in the Languedoc.

And if you'd like to hear more from me and my team of scouts as we travel the world looking for amazing real estate opportunities, you can sign up for *Overseas Dream Home* [here](#). In this free daily e-letter, you'll find a curated selection of breathtaking properties from desirable destinations around the world... to insider tips on navigating overseas real estate markets... and inspiring stories from those who've made their dream home a reality. You'll also get free reports, like the France scouting report.

■ **Thomas K. says:** How hard is it to get bank financing in Latin America as a non-resident foreign buyer, and which countries offer the easiest access?

■ **Ronan says:** The rules on whether

non-resident foreign buyers can get bank financing vary significantly across Latin America. In many countries in the region, you'll find that non-resident foreign buyers are technically allowed to access bank financing. But the reality is that mortgages are very difficult or even impossible to get. And the rates can be much higher than in the US.

Walk into a bank in Mexico, for example, and if you're very lucky, they might lend you 60% of the value of the property and charge you double-digit interest rates on your mortgage for the privilege. That's after they're done weighing you down with excruciating bureaucratic requirements. Then, and only then, will they decide whether to let you borrow money; they might still refuse. That said, there are a few incredible destinations in Latin America where mortgages are easier to obtain. One of them is **Costa Rica**.

Get a Mortgage—Even as a Foreign Buyer—in these Two Countries

Bank financing is available in Costa Rica for non-resident foreign buyers. The term can be up to 20 years, you can borrow up to 70% of the value of the property, and interest rates run around 9% or so, depending on which bank you go with.

Mortgages are available in the **Dominican Republic**, too. In the DR, as many folks call it, mortgages are available to non-resident foreign buyers for up to 80% of the value of the property. Rates are around 8% depending on the bank.

The availability of bank financing to non-resident foreign buyers is one of the reasons that Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic are seeing such impressive growth and huge interest from investors.

Editor's Note: Ronan McMahon is *IL*'s international real estate expert and founder of [Real Estate Trend Alert](#). If you have real estate questions and comments, email Ronan [here](#). We may publish your question along with Ronan's reply in *IL* Postcards or here in *IL* Magazine.

Why We Chose Oaxaca Over 30 Other Mexican Towns

Donna Shields

Eight months ago, my partner Gary and I departed from Denver on our BMW motorcycle to the city of [Oaxaca](#), Mexico, with the intention of making it our new hometown.

We'd made previous motorcycle trips throughout Mexico—touching down in some 30-plus cities, towns, and villages. Here's why Oaxaca kept calling our name. It's far enough south to have a warm, temperate climate, yet with a 5,000-foot elevation, it's rarely humid.

Another brownie point: the architecture. The ornate buildings in the city center are an eclectic mix of pre-Hispanic features combined with colonial Spanish design. For a big city, it gives off a neighborhood feel. It's walkable and has access to everything we need. And then there's the food. Oaxaca rightfully deserves its title as "the gastronomic center of Mexico."

How We Found the Right Neighborhood: Airbnb

We got our temporary residency paperwork started at the Mexican consulate before leaving Denver. Then we spent a few extra days at the Texas border to legally import our motorcycle. (Truth be told, there was a bit of anxiety watching the importer load our bike onto a pick-up truck, promising to return with the completed legal paperwork.)

We knew we needed to nail down a neighborhood to live in, so we decided to rent a different place every two months. As inconvenient as it was (remember, everything gets packed on the moto), it was a necessary part of the process.

Our Airbnbs have cost us between \$1200 and \$1500 a month. Crucially, we visited the properties before committing. We've found Airbnb listings are not always a true depiction of cleanliness, how tiny that patio space really is, and tend not to warn us about the wild dogs roaming the neighborhood.

Many neighborhoods offered large properties and modern homes, but those

weren't as walkable as we wanted; we'd need to have a car, or be willing to use the bus as our primary form of transportation.

We liked **Jalatlaco**, a colorful neighborhood a 10-minute walk from *centro*, but we ended up choosing **Xochimilco** (pronounced zo-chee-meelco). It's an older neighborhood with colonial style homes, cobblestone streets, lots of outdoor murals, and also within walking distance of *centro*.

A Rich Community of Indigenous and Modern Lifestyles

In Oaxaca, we visit new restaurants every week. We love the variety here, ranging from gourmet Oaxacan, to amazing street food, to every ethnic cuisine you can imagine. It's just as cheap for us to eat at our favorite *torta* (sandwich) truck or get chicken and yellow mole empanadas from a street vendor as it is to cook at home.

We're also able to take day trips on the bike to nearby villages. There's a Sunday motorcycle riding club, but we prefer to ride with just one or two other bikers or go solo. Visiting a nearby village in a smaller group allows us to have a more intimate experience with locals.

The surrounding region is populated with indigenous people living ancestral lifestyles. Zapotec women wear long braids and traditional, colorful dresses. Whether working a loom or selling tortillas at the market (which they make at 3 a.m. each morning), the villagers are some of the most industrious, hardworking people I've ever met. They speak Zapotec, a tonal American Indian language. (From them I learned to say "chichi-bay-oh," when raising a glass to cheer.)

If you're into textiles or pottery, you'll especially love it here. I did a 10-day homestay with a weaving family in Teotitlan del Valle—working on a 150-year-old loom is way harder than it seems.

Though I initially organized it for Spanish language immersion, it became a cultural immersion with people that are

now my best friends.

Speaking of language—we've been in Spanish classes for seven months and it's tougher than we'd imagined. Though we can get along just fine with directions, shopping, and ordering food, we're not yet having in-depth discussions with locals. To sharpen their Spanish, expats and snowbirds alike know to head to the **Oaxaca Lending Library**, which offers language exchanges on Saturday mornings. The Library also offers tours, lectures, and educational programs, and manages [Oaxacaevents.com](#), a one-stop calendar for town activities.

That's one of the best aspects of life here: creating a varied social circle. We have Mexican friends in their 20s and 30s who invite us to their parents' homes (that would never happen in the US). A group of Canadian guys in their 40s invite us to beer tastings. A lovely Mexican couple sitting near us in a restaurant invited us to their home. And the cop who stopped us on the street asked to practice his English with us, and now we know his family.

We've been amazed at the warm welcome and enjoy these cross-generational friends, along with American expats with whom we talk motorcycles and house renovations.

The Key to Expat Happiness

One of the drawbacks of living here: Everyone living in Oaxaca currently faces a water shortage. Many areas of Mexico, including Mexico City, deal with this as well. Oaxacan homes receive city water on a limited basis, so one must pay for additional water deliveries from private companies as backup. We use a bucket in the shower to catch extra as it's heating up, then use it to water the plants—ditto our dishwashing water.

Certainly, there are inconveniences here that my Type-A personality wouldn't be too willing to accept back in the US. But somehow, I've acquired a go-with-the-flow attitude. That's the key to a satisfying and happy relocation. ■

Donna Shields has traversed Mexico by motorcycle and is now living the dream in Oaxaca. She's packaged her Oaxacan school-of-hard-knocks experience into [Oaxaca Travel & Relocation Service](#) helping to pave the path for other expats.

A Modern Swiss Family Robinson in Puerto Viejo

Seán Keenan

Olivia Mendez's only regret about moving to **Puerto Viejo** was that she didn't do it sooner.

In 2021, Olivia, her husband Julián, and their three children left Toronto for the beachside village of Puerto Viejo on Costa Rica's Caribbean Coast, where Julián has extended family.

"I just didn't want to work for someone else anymore," Olivia explains. "The pandemic was a catalyst for making the move happen, but the idea was already there. I was in advertising, my husband's a building contractor. When we moved over, we bought some land and, with his background, it wasn't hard to get some rental properties built. Since then, I've sort of slipped into becoming a real estate agent, mainly through helping expats get set up in Puerto Viejo and the surrounding region."

"The Caribbean Dream" for Less

Wherever you go in Puerto Viejo, you're never far from the sea. The town itself is a grid of just nine blocks, though it's well-served with restaurants, bars, apparel stores, and health food outlets.

Playa Negra, just to the west of the town center, is the up-and-coming area, where the lower prices and undeveloped land is to be found. Southeast, along the 256 coastal road toward **Playa Cocles** and **Punta Uva**, is where many of the area's beach bars, restaurants, surf schools, and more upscale accommodations are located.

That's unsurprising, given that the beaches here are ash-blond strips of fine sand backed by hardwood jungle vegetation. It's the Caribbean dream, although much more affordable, relatively speaking, than on an island.

"You can build a basic, *tico*-style house on a small lot for \$200,000," Olivia says. "Obviously, it goes upwards from there, depending on your needs. One thing to note is that you're not allowed to build higher than two stories. Town planners like to keep things looking traditionally Caribbean here."

Over the past three years, Olivia and her family have put down deep roots in Puerto Viejo. "Our 14-year-old daughter initially found it difficult to adjust to her new school here, but she's now very happy with it. We'll be homeschooling our son this year, since he finds traditional learning environments a challenge, and our youngest daughter, who's four, just loves living in Costa Rica. She knows no different, really."

Olivia finds that the Caribbean side of Costa Rica fits their values. "It's a lot more traditional, more *tico* than other parts of the country, although there are lots of Europeans moving here these days. I enjoy socializing with *ticos*, they're very friendly." Knowing the locals helps with figuring out how to make the best of the place, too.

"You need a little time to figure out how to shop and budget," she explains. "It's not a Caribbean island—it's part of mainland Costa Rica—but in some ways it's like living on an island. And that includes island prices. You can spend a lot on groceries if you're not careful—like \$20 for a piece of cheese! But if you eat local produce, fish, and meat, those are all affordable."

"Non-essentials are pricey," adds Olivia. "But where you make it back is on the price of utilities, which are low. Our phone, internet, and electricity comes to



"I live a healthier lifestyle—and my kids have a better appreciation of what they've got."

between \$300 and \$500 a month. Our property tax for the year is \$500."

Like Olivia and her family, many of the expats who come to Puerto Viejo do so with the intention of buying some land and building a home with a rental property or two. "Labor is very cheap here compared to the US or Canada," says Olivia. "And land ranges from \$70 to \$150 per square meter, depending on where it's located."

"Rentals can be relatively expensive, because a lot of the North American-standard homes are going to be Airbnbs. If you can live in a more *tico*-style home, those go from \$600 a month up to around \$1,000 a month, depending on the size and style."

Despite Puerto Viejo's small size, two medical centers serve the town. Olivia rates the care highly.

"The quality is excellent, especially the private care. It's a fraction of the price of North American care. If you're resident in Costa Rica, you can sign up for the [CAJA](#) system, but even if you're not, they won't deny you care."

"It's a Recalibration of Priorities"

While there are probably fewer than 50 full-time North American expats in Puerto Viejo, there are also a dozen or so Europeans (French being the most numerous) who call the village home.

With her husband's extended family living in Puerto Viejo, Olivia has a wide network of contacts to call upon. And because the town was settled by Jamaican workers, English is more widely spoken here than anywhere else in Costa Rica.

"It's definitely a different lifestyle," says Olivia. "I have more time, I live at a slower pace. It's a healthier lifestyle; I eat better, I'm more active because of the warm weather, and it's a place that allows you to live more simply. It's like a recalibration of your priorities, moving here. I have a greater sense of community, having moved from a big city to a small town. There's a real emphasis on helping each other and giving back."

"And for my kids, it's a far better environment. They have a much better appreciation now of what they've got. As parents, that's important to us." ■

Seán Keenan is a senior editor at *International Living*. He's lived in Peru, Chile, Spain, Portugal, France—and his native country of Ireland.



Jeff is living the dream on Portugal's Silver Coast—for the most part. Below, learn what he'll do differently during his upcoming move to Lisbon.

We all make mistakes. But when those mistakes are wrapped up in moving across international borders, well, the sting burns a little hotter.

So, this month's *Field Notes* dispatch is a look at what I wish I'd done differently in moving to Portugal from the Czech Republic last year.

May the lessons I learned guide you through the stress, confusion, and wonderment of leaving America for foreign soil.

The Mistake I Almost Made in Prague

I decamped to Europe more than five years ago, leaving a very small, very expensive beachfront apartment in Long Beach, California, for a top-floor apartment in a leafy and popular district in Prague.

Frankly, luck smiled upon me in renting my apartment in Prague.

Before I had all my Czech work and residency documents, I was living in southern Ireland, which gave me easy access to Prague. I flew to the Czech capital and spent a week walking mile upon mile upon mile around the city to get a feel for what districts I liked and didn't like.

That made apartment selection substantially easier because I had basic knowledge of where I wanted to be.

Before my move, I was confident I wanted to live in the heart of Old Town, and for a couple of reasons:

Avoid Renter's Remorse With This Try-It-First Strategy

Jeff D. Opdyke

1. It's Old Town! I'd wandered those ancient streets on a business trip several years earlier, and living in a slice of what still resembles medieval Europe was highly appealing.
2. I worried that living too far outside Old Town meant I'd be diving too deeply into local Czech-ness. And my ability to operate in the Czech language resembles my ability to communicate effectively in Martian.

Turns out, however, that living in Old Town would have been the wrong choice.

Before I made the final leap to Old Town, I booked an Airbnb there... and came to realize the area is insanely crowded from March through October, and again at Christmas, because Prague is a hugely popular tourist draw. The crowds popping into Old Town pubs and absintheries culminates in excessive inebriation and noise well past midnight in the summer months.

Moreover, Old Town is, well, old. Many of the apartments in those

ancient buildings are small. Kitchens can be the size of a thumbtack, with teensy ovens that would struggle to roast a New York sewer rat. Those that have been remodeled are quite pricey.

Instead, I found that living just two or three subway stops outside of Old Town offered a far better lifestyle. The neighborhoods are gorgeous in a 17th- and 18th-century way. The apartments are much bigger (I had a two-bedroom, 1.5-bath apartment of more than 1,000 square feet that was bright, open, and airy), and they're markedly more affordable relative to their size.

Daily shopping is also far, far, easier outside of Old Town. Crowds don't exist. English is widely spoken. Hopping on metros and trams is less harried. And you're experiencing *real* Prague—the local street fairs, the local Christmas markets, and the local farmers markets that pop up weekly.

That's why I ended up choosing an apartment in Prague 2, the neighborhood directly south of Old Town. (Prague's

“Learn about your surroundings—before you commit.”

districts are numbered according to their centrality.) After spending so much time walking around the area—popping into restaurants, supermarkets, the local mall, even noting where the hospital was—I knew I’d be happy there.

And, indeed, Prague 2 holds some of the fondest memories of my five years of living in the Czech Republic.

And then we moved to Portugal...

Where I knew exactly what to do, but didn’t do it.

When I Didn’t Listen to My Own Advice

My wife and I relocated here last summer, to the small, beachy enclave called **Cascais**.

This is the Portuguese Riviera. Beautiful streets lined with palms and sycamores. The postage-stamp-sized neighborhood west of Cascais’ quaint and busy center reminds me of parts of Laguna Beach or La Jolla, California.

In a word: Picturesque.

Spoiler alert: My wife and I did not move to that picturesque neighborhood.

See, we were in a rush because of visa timing (Portuguese visas require you to have a local address—read more about this in March’s [feature story](#)), and the need to get my stepson enrolled in a local school because the fall term was just weeks away.

Plus, renters snap up the best Cascais apartments quickly because the city is in



demand.

So, we ended up in a Cascais neighborhood known as Torre.

I joke that my wife and I have rented a gorgeous two-bedroom, two-bath apartment... in a Brazilian *favela* (a shantytown).

Parts of Torre are quite lovely, to be sure. Just not our part. We live in a dated collection of apartment blocks reminiscent of the American inner city.

We’ve been here now for nine months. Over the summer, kids and what I think are jobless 20-somethings hang about outside on the walkways between the apartment blocks, laughing, yelling, and playing music well into the wee hours.

Just days before I sat down to write this, my wife and I heard a kerfuffle down below our second-floor apartment. We looked outside to see a scene straight out of *Fight Club*.

Clearly, this is *not* the place my wife and I want to live.

Had we been strategic and rented an Airbnb here first, we’d have known not to commit to this location.

As it is, the best I can say is that a Lidl supermarket is only a 90-second stroll from our apartment, and we did find Lebanese and Thai restaurants that have become favorites.

Beyond that... it’s just not a place I would ever choose to live again.

What You Need to Do Before You Move Overseas

Which really gets to the meat of this month’s dispatch. The smarter strategy my wife and I should have used is to rent an Airbnb somewhere in Cascais when we

first moved here. That would have allowed us to learn about our new surroundings before committing to any particular city or neighborhood.

Had we rented in the city center, for example, we’d be able to walk to an uncountable number of restaurants, including the sushi bar and Mexican joint we love. We’d have the marina and the small city beach a couple minute’s stroll from our front door. Basically, the lifestyle we love.

We originally chose Cascais because my wife wanted to be close to the beach, and because she knew that a lot of Ukrainians live in the area (she grew up on the Crimean coast when it was part of Ukraine). Plus, we’re only a 10-minute drive from one of the most beautiful and wild beaches—**Guincho Beach**.

Our lease in Torre ends June 30. And while we could now move to a better Cascais neighborhood, my wife misses urban life, so we’ve decided to give Lisbon a try.

And we are now seriously giving thought to putting all of our furniture into a storage facility, traveling through Croatia, Montenegro, and Albania across July and August, and upon our return to Portugal, renting an Airbnb for a month in a section of Lisbon we think we’ll like.

That will allow us to gauge whether we really

are happy there. If we are, great—we’ll begin looking for a permanent place to live.

And if we’re not, we’ll uproot after a month and alight in another Airbnb in a different neighborhood.

And we’ll keep this up for as long as it takes to find the neighborhood where we feel at home.

To me, it’s the strategy that makes the most sense when moving to a new country. ■

“You don’t truly know a neighborhood until you’ve lived there.”



Jeff’s moving, but not before “testing” out the neighborhood by renting an Airbnb.



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As a constituent country of the Netherlands, Curaçao offers a unique benefit: Dutch citizenship.

Want an EU Passport? “Go Dutch” in the Caribbean

Ted Baumann

According to legend, Dutchmen bought the island of Manhattan from Native Americans for \$24 worth of beads. They called the island “New Netherland,” a colony that lasted for 65 years.

The country most people know as the Netherlands once had a significant colonial empire. The Dutch had seven places in the Caribbean: Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Sint Maarten, Saba, Sint Eustatius, and Suriname.

Though Suriname is now an independent republic, Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius are still “special municipalities” of the Netherlands. Their residents are Dutch citizens, and Dutch immigration law applies there.

But **Curaçao, Aruba, and Sint Maarten** are “constituent countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.” While these countries are autonomous of the Netherlands in terms of internal affairs, the Dutch monarch is still their head of state.

Residents of these Caribbean countries are subjects of the Dutch crown, but not necessarily citizens of the Netherlands. They have their own governments respon-

sible for internal affairs, including immigration. The Dutch government controls foreign affairs and defense on behalf of the monarch.

The Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands created a Council of Ministers with one representative from the Netherlands and one each from the Caribbean territories. The Council—not the Dutch government—is empowered to control “the general rules governing the admission and expulsion of Netherlands nationals and aliens.”

And within that phrase lies your back door path to the EU...

Live in a Caribbean Country With a Path to Dutch Citizenship

Curaçao is the largest Dutch constituent country in the Caribbean by both size and population. It’s found about 40 miles off the coast of Venezuela.

Today, the island has settled down to a stable and competent polity, with a government that embraces civil, political, and economic liberties. Since the island is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, it is regarded as an overseas possession of an EU state, which means that it is subject to

some forms of oversight by the EU itself.

That, combined with substantial EU development aid, means the government must keep high standards to stay in the bloc’s good books.

Curaçao’s emulated the Cayman Islands, which has a similar status under the British monarchy, by becoming a financial haven. Today, the TMF Group’s Global Business Complexity Index ranks Curaçao second to the Caymans in terms of the ease and simplicity with which you can run a business or bank there.

Unlike the Caymans, however, which is unsuited to substantial immigration because of its size, Curaçao decided to incorporate another revenue stream: residency by investment.

Buy a Home, Get a Golden Visa

In 2014, the island’s government introduced **The Curaçao Investor Permit Program (CIPP)**. Like similar golden visa programs around the world, it allows foreign investors to get a renewable residence permit by investing on the island. Qualifying investments include residential or commercial real estate, local business, or securities on the Dutch Caribbean Securities Exchange. In the case of residential real estate, it doesn’t have to be used as a home and can be rented out.

There are currently three CIPP tiers:

- A three-year renewable residence permit with an investment of \$280,000.
- A five-year renewable residence permit with an investment of \$425,000.
- An indefinite residence permit with an investment of \$850,000.

If you choose the real estate option, there are no legal obstacles or conditions to foreign ownership of any kind.

In addition to the funds for the qualifying investment, you’ll also need to have health insurance coverage. The residence permit covers the main applicant, a spouse, and minor children. It doesn’t give holders the right to work on the island, but there’s no obstacle to working for offshore businesses or clients. If you manage to find work locally, you can apply for a work permit.

The CIPP only requires applicants to spend one day a year on the island. But many people who apply for the program spend four months or more on the island every year—with good reason, as you’ll see.

Receive an EU Passport in Five Years

Anyone with residence rights on the island also has the right to spend unlimited time in the Netherlands itself (albeit without the right to work there). And since the Netherlands is part of the EU, Curaçaoan residency effectively gives you the unlimited right to travel throughout the EU (again, without the right to work).

But the cherry on top is that after five years of unbroken Curaçaoan residency—if you spend at least four months a year there—you can apply for a Dutch passport. Since you're living in a Dutch royal territory, your time there counts toward Dutch naturalization. It doesn't matter whether you spend any time in the Netherlands itself or not.

Given the three investment options under the CIPP, there are three ways to meet the five-year naturalization requirement:

- Get immediate permanent residency with the highest investment amount.
- Take the five-year residency option with a qualifying investment.

- Choose the lowest investment amount for a renewable three-year permit, renew it once, and be eligible for Dutch citizenship within two years of the second permit.

There is one caveat, however, and it's a biggie: the Netherlands does not allow dual citizenship.

At least, that's what they say. There's been a lot of discussion recently in the Netherlands about this, and like neighboring Germany, the country is poised to consider dual nationality soon.

In the meantime, however, it is possible to receive an exception based on your individual circumstances.

For example, if you're a US citizen, renouncing your citizenship is a cumbersome, time-consuming, and potentially costly step, especially if you have substantial wealth (including retirement accounts). It may be possible to keep your US passport if you can prove giving it up would be a burden.

The other fly in the ointment is a requirement that you speak, read, and write Dutch and Papiamentu, the Curaçao

dialect. You'll also need to take an exam on Dutch society.

The bottom line here is that whether you're interested in full EU citizenship or the right to unlimited travel within the EU, Curaçao provides a pathway that simply doesn't exist if you try to go directly through the Netherlands, where it's difficult to gain long-term residency rights that would qualify for naturalization.

In previous articles, I've talked about how EU countries like Portugal and Spain are eliminating citizenship by investment in real estate. But Curaçao still gives you the option of buying personal property—which, given the island's popularity as a tourist destination, could also produce rental returns and yields for years to come. ■



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TROPICAL LIVING FOR 40% LESS THAN THE US

Known for its nightlife, restaurants, and beach clubs, Curaçao is a mere 171.4 square miles in size, with a population of about 192,500. (That's quite a bit larger than many of the more popular Caribbean citizenship havens, like Dominica, which only has 42,000 residents.) Seventy percent of the population live in cities or towns, most in the capital of **Willemstad**—reportedly a busy place every night of the year.

But the biggest attractions are white sand beaches and blue tropical water. Diving, snorkeling, fishing, and sailing are popular.

The island is classified as a tropical savanna, like the northern part of sub-Saharan Africa or central India. It only gets about 22 inches of rain a year, between October and January, so you won't see the tropical vegetation you see elsewhere in the region. Most people are of Afro-Curaçaoan heritage and speak Papiamentu, a Creole blend of European and African languages, and one of the official languages in addition to Dutch and English.

English is widely spoken, as is Spanish.

The island is popular with Dutch and other European retirees. It's also popular with visitors and semi-permanent residents from the South American mainland.

The official currency is the Antillean guilder, also called the florin. The government manages its value, and it's pegged at 1.80 ANG to the US dollar. Dollars are accepted almost everywhere on the island.

The island has no public transport, and taxis tend to overcharge. One of the downsides of life on the island is the road system. Paved roads are poorly maintained, with many potholes. Road markings can be missing or misleading. But since the island isn't very big, most people get used to it.

There is crime on the island, rooted in low-income communities. But expats say that as long as you avoid remote and isolated areas, there's nothing to worry about.

On the other hand, basic utilities are about 30% less than the US, while internet connectivity—which is quite good—is about 21% cheaper. Rental accommodation is dramatically less than the US—up to 75% less.

The prices of most non-food consumer goods are about the same as in most American cities. Most foodstuffs are less expensive than in the US, with a few exceptions like imported fruit and milk. Gasoline is much more expensive than in the US, but the island is small, and most people use bicycles or motor scooters. Overall, the cost of living in the territory is about 42% less than in the United States.

Healthcare is based on the Dutch system. There are two general hospitals, one surgery hospital, and one maternity clinic. Numerous private insurance companies, as well as the Social Insurance Bank, offer insurance. The island provides uniform insurance to all citizens under the Basic Healthcare Insurance Act (BVZ) of 2013. Under the BVZ, non-residents with a civil law labor contract and a business that must pay payroll taxes are also covered.

There are several three- to five-hour direct flights to the island from cities in North America, including Atlanta, Miami, and New York, as well as Ottawa and Montreal.



Uruguay may be a long plane ride from the US, but that's part of its appeal. It's out of the way, out of the fray, and easy to get residency in this paradise.

Out of the Way, Out of the Fray, Uruguay Offers a Return to Simplicity

Jessica Ramesch

An Art Deco hall in a dark alley in Montevideo. A man and woman walk out onto the worn wooden floor. The man turns to face her, and the woman raises her arm. Slowly, very slowly (this is an artform). Almost caressing his neck, her hand comes to rest, lightly, teasingly, just below.

They move. Cheek to cheek under the chandelier. A kick, a turn, and a shuffle. They make their way around the dimly lit room without breaking their embrace. The romance, the pageantry... I am enthralled.

Neighboring Argentina is known for its tango, but it's only here that I truly begin to understand its appeal. This is no streetside show for the tourists. It's a civic club for Montevideans, and I am a novelty. The only "outsider" watching from a chair against the wall.

People continue to arrive, greeting me as they squeeze by. A woman in a fur coat sweeps in and makes a beeline for a table in the back, giving me a kiss on the cheek

without missing a beat. I am surprised and pleased.

Today, I get my first taste of the Uruguayan warmth that I will encounter—though I don't know it yet—at every turn.

I meet Elizabeth, a true-blue lover of all things tango, who sits next to me to talk for a bit. When I tell her I'm renting a car and setting out on my own along the coast, she gives me her number.

This is another thing that will happen constantly when I tell people I'm here to wander their beautiful country.

"If you need anything, call me."

Latin America's "Mr. Nice Guy"

On the South Atlantic and the Río de la Plata, over 4,000 miles from the southernmost tip of the United States, you'll find la República Oriental de Uruguay. This "tiny" nation shares borders with Brazil and Argentina; you can travel to Buenos Aires by ferry in just over an hour, or drive into Brazil in four and a half.

A bastion of political rights and civil liberties... with an educated populace and, top-notch healthcare ... rich in fresh water and farmland (affordable farmland that you can buy for as little as \$2,000 an acre)... Uruguay, on paper, looks great. If you saw it on a dating app, you would swipe right.

At least, that would be the smart thing to do. Here's where I confess that I was, at least viscerally, more drawn to Argentina, despite its economic woes. Argentina is sexy and a little dangerous, with a Wild West "next land of opportunity" kind of feel. A young, vibrant expat woman I met there put it best: "Nothing is easy in Argentina, but everything is possible."

Intellectually, however, I felt compelled to take a serious look at Uruguay. With all the potential and none of the danger, Uruguay is the sensible choice. It feels like saying no to the quintessential bad boy and (finally) saying yes to Mr. Nice Guy.

If you've ever felt yourself drowning in a sea of bad news—political, racial, and religious divisions, gun violence at home, wars abroad, refugee immigrants with nowhere left to go—Uruguay feels blessedly quiet.

Latin America's "good neighbor" has no enemies. Nor is it beholden to any foreign power. Out of the way and out of the fray, Uruguay, it seems, has perfected the art of minding its own business.

It's the kind of place where one can truly disconnect and live off-grid... a sparsely populated country with miles of open fields between towns. Disappear into the heartland where the gauchos live or stake your claim on the long, windswept coastline.

If the quiet life is what you're after, come.

Unburden Yourself in Uruguay

Under former political prisoner turned president (2010-2015) José Mujica, Uruguay ushered in a new era, legalizing gay marriage and abortion and decriminalizing cannabis. Outside media portrayed his austere lifestyle as something extraordinary. In my mind, he became Mujica the Monk. The modern ascetic (and political anomaly).

But once I got to Uruguay, I learned that many Uruguayans live similarly uncomplicated lives. You'll see all kinds of people living simply, in modest homes or without cars. Outside of the capital, cows, sheep, and horses dot the fields (in fact, the ratio of horses to people is about 1:8,



the fourth highest in the world.) Uruguay is a country of progressive thinkers, but it is still in many ways rustic and traditional.

The Western world may be ensnared in the clutches of rampant consumerism, but not Uruguay. It's an inexpensive place to live a back to basics, no-frills lifestyle. Luxuries here will cost you. (Bus fares are as low as \$0.48, but a Toyota Rav could be double what you'd pay in the States.) It's not for everyone, but its ethos suits me.

The more I learned, the more I'd like to be Uruguayan... Luckily, it's easy to do. (See the box below.)

Life Along the Rambla in Montevideo

Montevideo—the windy capital city with the never-ending *rambla* (a 13-mile coastal promenade)—sits on the Río de la Plata

(described as a gulf, a sea, a river, or an estuary, depending on who you talk to).

Nearly half of Uruguay's population of 3.4 million lives along this vast body of water. Day-to-day life features walks along its northern shore, often holding a gourd of potent *charrúa mate*—a caffeinated herbal drink likened to green tea. You could call this walking ritual a national pastime.

"My husband José jokes that Uruguayans, no matter where they are in the world, will find a place to go walk back and forth," says Candace Rose Rardon, who lived in Montevideo for seven years. "Uruguayans love their *ramblas*. It's like there's a natural gravitational pull."

The beauty, perhaps, is the simpleness of it all. "It's enough to have your *mate* and a bag of *bizcochos* and just watch the sunset," she says.

(By the by, don't ask an Uruguayan what a *bizcocho* is, because *bizcochos* are *everything*. From croissants to churros, the definition is loose and wide.)

"I love that so many Uruguayans keep those striped beach chairs in their cars—ready at any moment to park the car, open the trunk, and pull them out," says Candace. "You'll see people sitting on the side of the road just hanging out, just chilling."

I witness this phenomenon and join in during my time here. No matter how hard the cold wind blows—temperatures can drop as low as 45 F in July—there are people enjoying the *rambla*.

With a great variety of restaurants and biweekly *ferias*—markets for fruit, veggies and more—Montevideo offers the perfect

THE EASIEST WAY TO MOVE ABROAD, FAST

Uruguay is one of the most immigrant-friendly countries in the world. Its constitution guarantees that anyone who qualifies can become a citizen.

That openness extends to residency. After arriving in the country, simply go to an immigration office and announce your intention to become a resident. Once you've filled out the paperwork, you can stay until it is processed.

To qualify, you need to show a monthly income of between \$1,500 (individual) and \$2,000 (couple). It can come from retirement or investment earnings or from remote work. You need to have a local address, either your

own home or rental. You also need the normal paperwork of passport, birth certificate, police report, and so on. Uruguay has no immigration quotas, and it doesn't reject applications unless the requirements aren't met. The refusal rate is around 3%.

Once you have permanent residency, your status can be lost only if you stay outside Uruguay for three or more consecutive years. If your goal is to become a citizen, however, expect to spend at least nine months out of 12 in the country. Uruguayan citizenship can be had after five years of continuous residency if you're single, or three years for a couple. —Ted Baumann

blend of city delights and healthy living. The circus-inspired **Dalí** restaurant; the **Museo del Carnaval**, with its flamboyant costume displays and big, spooky papier-mâché heads; and a phenomenal little jazz club called **El Mingus** are instant favorites.

“What I really love about Montevideo is the cultural life,” says Uruguay expat Karen A. Higgs. Originally from the UK, Karen moved to Uruguay 24 years ago from Washington, D.C. She’s since authored two books, and her homegrown website, **Guru’Guay**, is a massive resource on all things Uruguay. (In sweet anticipation, I perused her *Introduction to Uruguay Wine Country* several times before my trip.)

“For a city of just 1.5 million people—every night there are multiple shows, from live music to theater and independent cinema—there’s too much to choose from in my experience. I absolutely love it. It’s one of the reasons, despite having received offers to live elsewhere in the world, I’ve never been tempted to leave.”

Even with its many nightlife options, it’s also very quiet as capitals go. Even on a Saturday, there’s no discernable weekend buzz. That tranquility was a big change for Fred Khalichi, who found a job that allowed him to move from Toronto to Montevideo. Still, working in Montevideo felt like a vacation.

“Honestly, it was so surreal for me,” he says. “Before, I only got to see beaches as a tourist in places like Cancún. Having access to them right where I lived was incredible. Just being in the city and seeing the water would leave me energized. When the weather was warm and the beaches were full of people I’d think, ‘What a luxury.’ I’d just walk for a few minutes and—boom!—I was there.”

A safe, attractive capital, with reportedly the best quality of life in Latin

America and a long waterfront lined with beaches, Montevideo is a unicorn. That’s what Fred was looking for when he did hours of painstaking research in his quest to find a stable, peaceful, welcoming corner of the world, far from any turmoil in Europe or North America.

The unicorn analogy extends to real estate; you can rent in one of the nicest parts of the capital for less than \$1,000 a month.

Fred tested a few different parts of the city, including the *centro*, before landing on affluent **Pocitos**, on the *rambla* (this walkable neighborhood is where I chose to stay, too). He negotiated long-term rent on a fully furnished apartment for \$800 a month, including building fees, tax, and electricity. Expats can (and do) live well here on as little as \$2,900 to \$3,200 a month. Though he struggled a

“You can get permanent residency as soon as you arrive.”

THE BEST WINE YOU’VE NEVER TASTED... AND MORE

Uruguay’s wealth of **farmland** is something to admire. The country’s abundant natural resources and long growing seasons help it produce far more food than it needs. (Enough to feed 28 million people, though Uruguay’s population is less than four million.)

Uruguayan beef is among the best in the world—this you may already know. But few outside of Uruguay realize just how good Uruguayan wines are. (They’re overshadowed by the wines of Chile and Argentina, large countries with large wine industries.)

And the biggest surprise of all? Uruguayan olive oil! Fruity and a little funky, it’s probably the best olive oil I’ve ever tasted.

For anyone who loves to eat (and drink) well, traveling through Uruguay is diverting. And though I’ve never had a ton of patience for formal wine tastings, touring a real vineyard is another thing entirely.

I had a marvelous time at **Bodega Garzón** and, the next day, at **Viña Edén**. Breathing the Atlantic marine region air and watching the sun’s rays kiss those elysian fields, talk of terroir was neither uninteresting nor abstract. It was like listening to a farmer describe awesome “acts of god” that could

help, harm, or obliterate the vital harvest.

For these day trips, the town of José Ignacio was the ideal base. Each experience was different. At Garzón, you can enjoy imposing architecture and tramp through the fields with your guide and a sizable group. At Viña Edén, which has incredible mountain views, I happened to be the only person on the tour, and we focused more on the fascinating facility than the fields.

The group wine tour at Bodega Garzón was just the thing for a solo female traveler like me. Meeting other visitors and expats was challenging in Uruguay. The tour group, however, provided plenty of opportunities to talk to the other guests (mostly Uruguayans, Argentinians, and Brazilians). Modest amounts of wine served as social lubricant.

Every wine I sampled was superb, even as young wines (2021–2022)—an albariño reserva, a pinot noir rosé reserva, a marselan reserva, and, finally, a tannat reserva that I would’ve loved to pair with pecorino, Roquefort, or dark chocolate. (See last page for my wine recommendations.)

After the tour, I purchased several bottles of wine and a bottle of olive oil to take back home.

Having heard rave reviews of the restaurant at Viña Edén, I decided to reserve for lunch onsite and a tour. (Booking was a great experience—the hostess, Karen, was happy to respond to any questions via Whatsapp.)

My meal overlooking the vineyard was an experience. First, I had their méthode champenoise pink bubbly with an impeccable trio of breads and spreads... and, to my surprise, oil-cured black and green olives grown in Uruguay. (I would kill for a few more.) For my main course, I chose a bright pink beet-laced risotto with goat cheese and pistachios—an excellent combination. My wine expert and tour guide, Mario, was affable and knowledgeable. Viña Edén is eco-friendly, with its own wind and solar. When they really want you to taste the terroir, they ferment or age wine in concrete or stainless steel instead of oak, early in the process.

I sampled an aromatic tannat cemento and liked it so much, I bought a bottle to take home. I also picked up a bottle of their marselan cemento. (When you come to Uruguay, make you sure bring an extra suitcase for the heavy glass bottles.)



With warm clay and rust tones that transport you to Iberia, Colonia exudes European charm.

little with learning [Rioplatense](#) Spanish, Fred felt welcomed and at ease.

“Life in Montevideo is really nice because of the people,” Fred says. “There were so many instances where they would offer help without my asking. When looking for a new apartment to rent, for example, someone would offer to come with me and translate. That’s just how they are.

“I came in as a single—a foreigner who didn’t know anybody. Now I have friends in Montevideo—expats as well as locals—and no doubts. Montevideo is where I’m building my new life.”

Colonia del Sacramento: European-Inspired Living

The town of Colonia del Sacramento, a favorite of every Uruguayan I spoke to, offers small city living with undeniable aesthetic appeal. Walk the long, curving waterfront lined with trees and stately architecture, and you’ll be mesmerized. With small white buildings that look plucked out of Greece and warm clay and rust tones that transport you to Iberia, Colonia exudes European charm.

About 111 miles east of Montevideo, this small city is known for its historic center, or *casco histórico*. I, however, choose to stay in “the other Colonia”—a rural sector just a 10-minute drive out—making friends with a phenomenal internationally-trained chef, Martín Rosberg.

An artisan baker and cheesemaker born in Argentina, Martín has a *chacra*, or small farm, overlooking a speck of a vineyard. On it he’s built three Airbnb rentals—two “treehouses” and my pick, a sweet, flower-adorned [bungalow](#) called El Nido. I could not have lucked into a better host.

Martín welcomes me with a loaf of fresh baked bread (it smells like my version of heaven) and a cheese platter. I could be in Normandy, his camembert is that good. He’s also a knowledgeable local resource. We talk about the safety and appeal of Colonia, the availability of farmland, the quality of the country’s milk and dairy products; soon he’s got me thinking I should move here and make cheese. (Then again, I get heartburn just *thinking* about double-cream brie.)

After our chat, I head into town and find an ideal parking spot in front of Hostel El Español. From here I set out on foot along the cobblestone lanes, toward the 18th century cannons of the **Bastión de San Miguel**.

The sidewalk is sandwiched between shade trees and tiny square homes, their flat-faced façades forming an unbroken barricade to my right. Every block or so I see a vintage car parked on the roadside. They take me back in time, first a classic VW bug, then an army green Vauxhall whose bumper has rusted off. (I am not a

car person, but it would be something to drive around in this little beauty.)

I experience a thrill crossing the drawbridge under the imposing stone gate of San Miguel, thinking only the mighty Thor could lift these chains. This part of Colonia has a privileged location on a stub of a peninsula that juts out into the Río de la Plata, so there’s water nearly every which way I look.

Circling the *barrio* dotted with cafés and shops, I am reminded of pretty Villefranche-sur-Mer near St Tropez, though Colonia is far less crowded.

Founded by the Portuguese in 1680, taken by the Spanish, subjected to a century-long tug-of-war—it’s amazing how peaceful and unscathed Colonia looks today.

Learning from Locals: Quality of Life in Colonia

At lunch, I chat with Uruguayan residents who tell me rent and groceries are cheaper here than in Montevideo, along with little things like visits to the salon or barber.

“If you like city life, choose Montevideo,” they tell me. But for those who enjoy life *en el interior*—country or small-town living—then Colonia is a favorite. (**Minas**, a mountain town north of the Greek-inspired **Piriápolis**, is also beloved, and rightly so.)

There are [long-term rentals](#) available in Colonia for as little as \$650 a month, and I’m told in-person inquiries yield lower prices than an internet search. (Supply may increase substantially next year. An investment group led by Argentinian serial entrepreneur Eduardo Bastitta recently broke ground on a megaproject that aims to eventually double the population of Colonia, primarily by marketing new homes to Argentinians who come to Uruguay for work. The master plan includes new residences, offices and commercial spaces, plazas, and bike paths.)

On the way back to my car, I peer down the ancient-looking **Calle de los Suspiros**, the street of sighs. A small sign on a crumbling stone wall says Buen Suspiro, and promises the best in artisanal cheeses, sweets, wines. I duck in and am delighted—the post-medieval interior looks like it was snatched out of Pieter de Hooch painting.

The patron, Patricia, is so welcoming I just *have* to sit in and let her pour me a glass of wine (tannat, of course). We chat

for a little while but then she says she has to run. Ah well, it's a charming place to sit and sip my wine in silence, I suppose. She goes back behind the bar, gathers her things, and then says, "You know, I'm going to a little musical presentation later, if you'd like to meet me there."

I'm so surprised, it takes me a second to process that I am being extended a very kind invitation. *This is the part where you say yes, thank you, my brain sup-*

plies. An hour later, I've walked the few blocks to the historic **Hotel Beltrán** (est. 1873). The recital room is as intimate as can be. I am introduced to Yesenia and Nicolas, Patricia's friends who are to sing and play for us this evening.

With the simple accompaniment of guitar and drum, they induct me into the world of Uruguayan folklore. In between songs, they speak at length and with intensity about their musical endeavor.

It's an incredible evening—the opportunity to witness this small slice of local life a priceless gift. When I walk back to my car at 10 p.m., I pass one little bar filled with people, but otherwise the streets are deserted.

High-End Living in José Ignacio

This is it. The last leg of my adventure.

By the time I get back to Montevideo,

the odometer on [my rental car](#) will tell me I have driven 1,171 kilometers, or 727.6 miles. I will have seen bits of Balneario Solis, Bella Vista, Piriápolis, Punta Ballena, Punta del Este, El Edén, Minas, Villa Serrana, and a few others.

Here's what my basic itinerary, sans day-trips to vineyards (more on those below), looks like [on a map](#).

Every one of these places is aesthetically pleasing. **Punta del Este** is the most picturesque, while Villa Serrana left me wanting more (a bad cold kept me from exploring

properly). But **José Ignacio** turns out to be my favorite, with Colonia a very close second.

On my first day in José Ignacio—a Thursday—the quiet is deafening. There are families on the beach, but there's no crowding, just an overwhelming sense of open space. It reminds me of Nantucket in my college days, or the Hamptons (as seen in *Revenge*, starring Emily VanCamp).

José Ignacio is a fishing village—you can walk it in a couple hours—but it's filled with blocky homes that are both unpretentious and elegant. Restraint has prevailed, and if there's a McMansion somewhere here, it's well-hidden. Most of the homes are empty now, but during the summer the population can swell from a few hundred to a few thousand.

“If you like quiet, here's the place for you.”

I unpack and leave my studio apartment in **Casa Grande** on foot. Around the corner, I find a wine shop, an ample mini-market (part of Uruguay's fabulous [Devoto](#) supermarket chain), and a bakery called **Panadería José Ignacio**. At the latter, I am wowed by the bread and viennoiserie—they even have a small refrigerated display of farm-fresh greens and Uruguayan cheeses.

For lunch, I choose a bookstore café called [Rizoma](#). There are bookshelves up to the ceiling and a roaring fire in the café—hurrah, I have found my happy place. I have an *empanada de humita*, an unassuming dough package filled with savory corn and cheese. Delicious. With a warm, comforting center, it reminds me of the people I encounter during my time in Uruguay.

Later that day, I stumble upon a wine bar called [Solera](#). With a chic ambiance and tapas menu, it's the kind of place where I could linger with friends for hours. As much as I liked Colonia, José Ignacio definitely feels more exclusive and upscale.

A Hamptons Feel... But Seasonal

The weekenders trickle in on Friday and Saturday, and the road from parador **La Huella** is lined with cars. It lends a sort of holiday feel to the place. Anyone who lives here must be content to live through both the ghost town days and the weekend/vacation influx.

“People who've moved here really like it because during the on season, they have access to the most enjoyable things of life,” says Karen. “You have great food, great restaurants, great wine, and great beaches.” (It's no wonder there are whispers of celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio and Shakira enjoying quiet time here, far from the paparazzi.)

“It definitely feels like the Hamptons,” she agrees. “You just have to be aware that the full-time population of Ignacio is just 300 people.”

The pace of life in José Ignacio is slower than the average North American or European can imagine. “But most people moving to Uruguay are looking for that... and to simplify. You get that in José Ignacio. But you also maintain a certain quality of the finer things in life.”

“Winters can be intense, with a lot of wind,” says Karen, adding that restaurants and shops will close during the



Though it may take the guise of a humble fishing village, José Ignacio has a Hamptons-esque side.

URUGUAYAN WINES TO TRY (AND HOW BEST TO ENJOY THEM)

Here are the other wines I enjoyed during my time in Uruguay; give them a try if and when you can find them.

- Pisano pinot noir/petit verdot, Región Progreso, 2021 (my favorite, perhaps because I was listening to live jazz at the wonderful El Mingus in Montevideo).
- Leonardo Falcone Colección Privada syrah, 2020 (enjoyed with Martín's Uruguayan camembert)
- H. Stagnari, Gran Guarda tannat 65%, cabernet sauvignon 35% (sipped while watching the waves

crash on a blustery day in Punta del Este)

- Bodegones del Sur, limited edition cabernet franc (try anything from this winery)
- Bodega Cerro del Toro Reserva pinot noir, 2021 (paired with an endive salad and regular and aged colonia cheeses from Panadería José Ignacio)
- Montes Toscanini Reserva Familiar syrah, 2021 (enjoyed in front of a crackling fire in Haras las Tordillas horse lodge)

off-season—from the end of April, that is, for six to seven months. “It’s also probably one of the most expensive places to live in Uruguay.”

On the whole, as Karen rightly points out, Uruguay is already one of the more expensive countries in Latin America. But what’s “pricey” for an Uruguayan is still a bargain compared to the Hamptons. If you don’t mind the off-season, you could rent a condo—with an oceanview terrace, a seven-minute drive or half-hour’s walk from the lighthouse—for \$2,300 a month. (If you own the condo, you could possibly charge as much as \$4,200 a month to rent it out during high season.)

And this region isn’t just Hampton-esque—this is wine country, too. Just 27 miles north, you’ve got the striking **Bodega Garzón** facility and vineyard. A 45-minute drive northwest will get you to the idyllic **Viña Eden**. (You’ll likely be amazed at how many small wineries there are in Uruguay.)

Another thing to bear in mind: Uruguay has towns all along the coast, so it’s easy to live close to all this and more—even if you’re on a smaller budget. Come down and *explore*...

Learning to Live in (and Love) Uruguay

Though wonderful in many ways—Uruguay is welcoming, progressive, and very LGBTQ-friendly—there are challenges to life here.

“You’ll see palm trees, but it’s definitely not tropical,” jokes Fred. The humidity along the coast can make winters

cold and damp, while summers can be sweltering. That said, the climate—no matter where in the country you choose to live—is temperate. And though Uruguay can experience droughts and flooding, it’s known for fairly even rainfall throughout the year and is plagued by neither hurricanes nor earthquakes.

You’ll find it is expensive to rent or own a car and to get purchases shipped in. Value-added tax (VAT) or sales tax is 22% for most goods (10% for certain basic goods). That said, savings in other areas, such as healthcare, can still make Uruguay an overall more affordable place to live. A private comprehensive healthcare plan can cost as little as \$70 per month. And if, like many Uruguayans, you live car-free, you can save even more.

“I’ve learned how to take better care of my things from Uruguayans,” says Candace. “There’s a tendency in the US to think of things as disposable. If you want a new kettle, it’s easy to go on Amazon and get another one. But in Uruguay, things aren’t as replaceable. You have to be a bit more careful with what you own.

“It’s a very welcome breath of fresh air from consumerism compared to the US,” she adds. “If you’re looking for more balance and perspective in your life, Uruguay can teach you a lot.”

A Halston-esque Hotel in Romantic Montevideo

When I get back to Montevideo, I check into the [Hotel Costanero Montevideo](#) [MGallery](#), one of the most stylishly deco-

rated hotels I’ve ever stayed in.

My room looks like it could have been designed by Halston... and yet the prices for this five-star property, starting at about \$145 a night, are within reach for those of us who will never wear a \$500 jumpsuit.

It’s a beautiful backdrop—set against that iconic *rambla*—against which to reflect on my experiences in Uruguay. Everywhere, without fail, I have been met with kindness (the staff at this hotel is no exception, I should add).

Along the way, I collected new friends, who messaged me throughout my trip: “How are you?” “Where are you headed next?” They offered recommendations and made me feel like I had someone to call if I ever needed help.

(“Oh, you’re headed *there*? Call my sister Mercedes.”)

I’ve met kind and friendly people all around the world, but Uruguay is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before. Ever.

To wit—I have three items on my agenda before my flight out:

First, a settling of debts. I meet up with Juan Luis of [Haras las Tordillas](#) lodge. He and his wife Lucía already feel like friends. Last week, we had such an enjoyable evening sitting in front of the fire at the lodge, engaged in meaningful conversation, that we all forgot I had to pay for my stay. (Unconcerned, he sent me a message: “Don’t even think about back-tracking. You can pay me when you get back to Montevideo.”)

Next is a group dinner. I asked attorney Francesca Magno of [Andersen Uruguay](#) a million questions before my trip, but that didn’t put her off. She takes me out to swanky [Manzanar](#)—with her husband and three other friends. The chef takes me on a mini-tour so I can see the wood-burning oven and grill pit. It’s a lovely evening.

Finally, a festival. I met some fellow Indians at a street fair in front of [Moksha](#) restaurant, and they urged me to come back this evening. There is a *puja*, street food, dancing; I could almost be in India. This extra bit of connection is the last little gift that surprising Uruguay gives me before I go home. ■

Jessica Ramesch has lived on the Indian subcontinent and floated all around the Caribbean (and some snazzy parts of Europe, too). Now, she resides in Panama as *IL*’s Overseas Editor.



In places like lush Lake Arenal, you can nab “free” property with the “divide and conquer” strategy.

Become a Mini-Developer and Own in Paradise—for Free

Ronan McMahon

How would you like to own a home or hotel in paradise for free? It’s possible—when you use a real estate strategy I call “divide and conquer.”

Here’s an example of what I mean: Back in 2017, I shared an opportunity with members of my [Real Estate Trend Alert](#) group to own a hotel around **Lake Arenal** in Costa Rica. Arenal is a tranquil area in the northwest of the country. The landscape is breathtaking—green hills surrounding a glistening lake, with volcanic peaks towering in the background.

While scouting here, I got word that a small lake-view hotel was for sale. The hotel was in good condition and came with a café and bookstore. And at the back of the hotel, there were eight *casitas*, plus land for more development.

This was an amazing opportunity. If you did a little renovation work and added a kitchenette to each of the *casitas*, I figured you could list them for up to \$60,000 each, then sell them off to another buyer, or eight individual buyers.

The owner was asking for \$500,000, but I sensed they’d take less. I recommended offering \$415,000. At anywhere close to that price, the money you’d make

from selling the casitas would have more than covered the cost of the hotel. With the divide and conquer strategy, you’d get a “free” hotel, bookstore, and café.

These opportunities are available to anyone willing to become a mini-developer. And the aftermath of Covid-19 is the perfect time to look for them. We’ve seen a flight from big cities, with the largest 10 cities in America losing about 2 million residents since the pandemic. For the past several years, as the work-from-anywhere trend has taken hold, people have moved in big numbers to the world’s most desirable destinations—places that used to be considered vacation spots, like **Cabo** or Portugal’s **Algarve** region.

But now, as those destinations become busier, people are moving again, away from the buzz and bustle... to places where you can apply strategies like divide and conquer. That’s presenting additional opportunities for mini-developers.

How to Choose the Right Real Estate

All over the world, there’s good-value real estate in need of a little TLC—properties that have been overlooked by the local market. Identify the right one, apply the

right strategy, and you could see big gains.

Before you start looking at listings, though, look for a transformational event. When investing in real estate, it’s always best to buy in a destination on the cusp of reaching a new level of demand. This is one of the key strategies I use to find incredible deals for my *Real Estate Trend Alert* group. (See the box below for details.)

After identifying a destination, learn the market. Lots of mini-developers buy the right real estate in the right place at the right time—but develop it in the wrong way. They build or renovate to their own tastes, rather than those of the market. For instance, in some destinations, the best play might be subdividing a building into several individual long-term rentals—and in others, it might be offering a large renovated house that caters to big groups of short-term renters. **Once you’ve studied the market and it’s time to look for listings, here are three things to look for:**

No. 1: A Large Property That Can Be Subdivided

A classic play as a mini-developer is to find an old, overlooked larger property and subdivide it into rental units. In 2019, for example, I told *RETA* members about an opportunity in **Porto**, Portugal’s second-largest city. Back then, Porto was emerging as a major tourist destination, but you could still find good deals on historic residential buildings in the city.

I found one with high ceilings, grand windows, and a private garden that was available for around €130 per square foot. I figured you could subdivide and renovate it for €110 per square foot. In the case of this building, I would’ve created eight apartments. Apartments like this were in huge demand in Porto as short- and long-term rentals back then, and even more so today.

Back when I recommended this opportunity, I figured when you finished the renovations, you’d be in for €240 per square foot. But the condos would be worth €380 per square foot. It’s also worth noting that they’d be worth much more than this today. According to data from late last year, property prices are up more than 60% in central Porto since 2019, meaning anyone who followed this play did extremely well.

No. 2: Buildings Where You Can Add a Floor

Often, you’ll find adding a story to real

estate in an up-and-coming area costs much less than building or buying something new. For instance, in 2020, I got word about a special opportunity in **Medellín**.

Medellín is Colombia's trendiest city, and a major hotspot for well-heeled digital nomads and work-from-anywhere professionals. A contact there told me about a three-story building in **Laureles**, a leafy, low-rise neighborhood that's especially popular with digital nomads. This building was already an established Airbnb business divided into 10 studios, and was turning over \$5,000 to \$6,000 a month.

I figured you could get the building for around \$350,000. Then you could spend another \$50,000 or so to reduce the amount of smaller studios and create two larger, one-bed condos per floor, for a total of eight units. Large, street-facing studios with balconies work best for single travelers/digital nomads. This would then allow you to increase the number of floors, as that's restricted by density per building. After adding the new floor, you'd have more real estate and more income—in one of the most sought-after areas of Medellín.

This is also a strategy I've used in my own life. My wife's parents grew up in Guadalajara, Mexico, and in recent years they moved back there. So, my wife designed and built a place for us to use when visiting by adding a story to her parents' home. This meant we got a home in a lovely neighborhood of Guadalajara, one of Mexico's major economic centers, for only

around \$80,000. That's a fraction of what it would have cost to buy something in the neighborhood.

No. 3: Homes with Developable Land

It's always worth investigating real estate that comes with developable value. In 2018, I told my *RETA* group about a lakeview house in Arenal. The house was move-in ready, spanned 3,000 square feet, and came with 13 acres of land. But the owner was willing to sell for just \$385,000.

This play works by subdividing and selling some of the land around the house. This was relatively easy to do in the case of this house. The home was inside an established private community so it already had roads, water, electricity connections, etc.—so, the infrastructure, which is the biggest expense when you're carving out lots to sell, was already established.

Back then, I figured lots of 1.25 acres with lake views would sell for \$80,000 to \$100,000. If you sold four lots at the top price, you would recoup the purchase price—and bag the house and eight acres of land for free.

Where to Look for Opportunities

Today, you'll find opportunities to pursue these strategies in desirable destinations across the world. But here are a few places to start your research.

I own a home on Portugal's **Silver Coast**, between Porto and Lisbon. Prices here are pushing higher as people look for

quieter havens away from Lisbon and the Algarve, but you'll still find dated apartment buildings in great locations. These are prime targets for redevelopment.

Then there's the town of **Caminha** on Portugal's northern border with Spain. It has a beautiful Old Town, surrounded by verdant countryside on one side and stunning beaches on the other. Caminha is the kind of place people are flocking to: a destination with plenty of space, where you can live a relaxing outdoor lifestyle. And all around Caminha, you'll find shells of grand villas sitting empty, waiting for someone to bring them back to life. These are a major opportunity, too.

Away from Europe, look to up-and-coming beach towns in **Baja California**, like **La Ventana**. These towns tend to have basic, budget accommodations and expensive boutique hotels, but little in the "sweet spot" for people who want comfort and a touch of luxury without breaking the bank. Developing rentals for this market could be highly profitable. ■



Ronan McMahon is *IL*'s international real estate expert and the founder of *Real Estate Trend Alert*. He's been traveling the world for more than 25 years, living and investing in some of the world's dreamiest—and surprisingly affordable—locations. Join his *Overseas Dream Home* letter right [here](#).

WHAT'S BETTER THAN A FREE HOUSE? THESE DEALS.

The best way to buy real estate overseas is in off-market deals.

Sixteen years ago, I founded a group called *Real Estate Trend Alert*, bringing together like-minded real estate investors who, like me, understand that there's always opportunity somewhere when you look *everywhere*. Using boots-on-the-ground scouting, my team and I identify stunning destinations overseas that are on the cusp of a major transformation. Then, with the collective buying power of our *RETA* group, I negotiate an off-market deal with a best-in-class developer there.

By buying early in a transformation, and owning at killer discount prices that ordinary investors never see, we can get huge uplifts.

I'm talking about deals where values double in as little as three years on top of income.

- **\$222,000 gain in Caribbean Mexico**—In 2019, I brought *RETA* members the chance to own luxury condos on Mexico's Caribbean coast, from just \$174,800. A two-bed bought here for \$178,000 later sold for \$400,000.
- **\$250,000 more in Cabo**—In August 2021, *RETA* members could get a penthouse in a community called Cabo Costa for \$249,000. I got one. Today a penthouse in Cabo Costa lists for \$499,000.
- **\$309,018 more in Playa del Carmen**—In 2021, *RETA* members had the chance to buy two-bed condos in Playa del Carmen on Mexico's Caribbean coast from

\$265,304. In early 2024, a two-bed condo in a development called Singular Dream, listed for \$574,322.

Of course, these deals aren't possible everywhere. I can only bring *RETA*'s group-buying power to bear in destinations that can host big projects.

For instance, our group-buying power works well in Cabo, where developers have the space to deliver large-scale, amenity-rich communities. But it can't be applied in destinations like Porto, Portugal, or Medellín, Colombia, because these are densely developed cities and it's not feasible for developers to get large land parcels. In those markets, we can look to the mini-developer strategies.

Try Housesitting for a Richer Travel Experience

Rebecca Dugas

For four weeks in Valencia, Spain," Todra Payne says, "I was eating squid ink *paella* at famous restaurants, getting massages at Balneario La Alameda (a thermal spa built in 1908), and checking out the museum at the Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias."

While Todra was in Spain, her husband Paul was walking through **Haagse Bos**, a protected forest in the middle of The Hague in The Netherlands—and later, in the Czech Republic, enjoying Old Town Prague's medieval architecture and famous beer pubs.

Todra and Paul are full-time housesitters, able to live rent-free in large, beautiful homes in sought-after areas. "We sometimes had housekeepers and gardeners on loan," says Todra.

But to housesit full-time the couple, hailing from Los Angeles, sometimes has to travel separately.

It can be challenging to juggle housesitting dates, Todra explains. They often need to rent an Airbnb between sits. And if two opportunities have overlapping dates, one of them will go ahead while the other closes out the first housesit.

"The other reason we travel separately sometimes is because it's fun! When we're together, we use our combined superpowers to navigate new cities and challenges, but when we're alone, we have to use our own instincts, wits, limited language skills, etcetera, and it sharpens us in ways we thoroughly enjoy," she says.

She once went to London on her own. "I ate Indian food at a restaurant that Prince Harry loves, shopped at night markets jumping with live music, and stood in massive lines of hip young people waiting to peruse vintage clothing and record shops.

"Paul tends to like more serene places, while I like the energy of cosmopolitan areas with spas, trendy restaurants, and shopping more than he does."

She says people rarely approach her and Paul when they're together. But when she's on her own, other women often

strike up conversations. "It's so much fun, especially if we're fighting through bits and pieces of various languages. I have a little Spanish, she has a little Italian. We both know charades. As a last resort, one of us will pull out Google Translate." Todra has even planned meet-ups with nomadic Facebook friends when they both happen to be in the same country.

One time, after missing her original flight from Turkey, she arrived in Denmark at 8 a.m., hungry, cold, and miserable. She had a day before her next housesit, so she checked into "a trendy, expensive, modern youth hostel."

The bunk beds hung suspended from the walls with a "bubble" she could pull down for privacy. "Three other solo women travelers from Brazil, the UK, and South Africa were in the room with me, so we sat up at night chatting and sharing snacks. Although I missed Paul, I wouldn't have had that youth hostel experience if I'd been with him."

Save Money, Stay Longer

Staying safe isn't too hard, with common sense and situational awareness. "Just be wise and careful and ask lots of questions before accepting an assignment," she says.

Todra encourages women to use housesitting if they plan on traveling abroad. It

saves money and allows them to stay longer in one location. Housesitting is a great way to meet locals and live in a real neighborhood instead of a hotel. It's a more authentic travel experience.

Todra housesat domestically before she met Paul and the pair took the venture abroad. "One of the biggest questions I get from women interested in traveling through housesitting is, 'Is it safe for a woman housesitting solo?'" says Todra. "But I've never felt unsafe as a solo female housesitter/traveler."

Do This Before You Housesit Solo

Still, she takes several precautions before accepting a solo housesit:

- She only uses established housesitting websites, like [TrustedHousesitters](#), with respected housesitting communities and with homeowners who have positive reviews.
- She only accepts solo housesits in well-populated areas and bustling cities.
- She only housesits for women or couples, not single men.
- She only accepts housesits with cats "because I don't want to be out late at night walking a dog on unfamiliar streets."
- She also does a bit of online digging to check crime rates in their area.
- She has a video call with homeowners, during which she asks for their address and then looks them up on Google street view.

Todra always conducts a video call with the homeowners first "because there's something about seeing and hearing someone, even through technology, that gives me a chance to check my gut feelings. And I'm serious about saying, 'No, thank you,' if something feels off." She adds that she doesn't travel alone to countries where "I'd be targeted on the streets just because I am a foreign woman from a very different culture."

Todra advises women interested in this lifestyle to start house- and petsitting for friends and family. "If the sit is in an unfamiliar city, that's even better because it gives a small taste of what it's like to be outside of one's comfort zone," she says. ■

Rebecca Dugas loves writing from the road as she and her husband crisscross the US in their RV. Connect with her at [heart-sell.com](#).



To maximize their travels, Paul and Todra often housesit independently.

Petsit Your Way to a Globetrotting Life

Christine Ventra

Right now, roaming expats Dave and Christie Vegas are soaking up the sun in the seaside resort city of **Hua Hin, Thailand**—and the reason they're here is wagging her tail and intently eyeing the treat in Christie's hand.

Hua Hin, perched on the Gulf of Thailand a three-hour drive from **Bangkok**, is a popular destination for snowbirds and full-time expats alike. That's where Christie and Dave come in. While the owners are back in Australia, they're housesitting a two-bedroom villa with a pool and caring for a former *soi* (street) dog named Guinness.

"Seven a.m. finds us sitting outside in the cool morning air sipping a delicious brew and planning our day," says Christie. "It's a decent-sized city, so I am making the most of what's on offer, learning new skills with weekly TRX, karate, and craft classes." There are also plenty of expeditions in the city, trying out cafes, restaurants, and street markets.

Thailand is a far cry from a three-month housesit the couple did last year back in their home country of New Zealand. Then, they cared for a pedigree cat in a sprawling lakeside home 15 minutes from the scenic tourist city of **Rotorua**. With the owners' ready permission, they were able to host a family reunion.

In between, they've petsat in home-town suburbs, summered two cats in beachside **Otaki**, New Zealand, and spent three weeks minding a cat and four kittens in an elegant beach villa in **Sanur, Bali**.

Yet Christie and Dave never paid a cent to stay in these homes. In seven years and 50-plus housesits, the slow travellers have taken care of dogs and cats, chickens, quail, fish, rabbits—and even an axolotl.

An Accidental Fall Into Petsitting

"We never seriously considered housesitting when we began traveling full-time in 2015. We thought it might be too much of a bind, restricting our activities and opportunities to travel,"

says Dave. "We'd been traveling through Southeast Asia, alternating between homestays, hotels and condos for perhaps a year, when we met a couple that housesat. They convinced us to look at it again, and we're so glad we did! In fact, it was through them that we got our first sit, at a palatial home in Singapore minding two dogs and a cat."

The pair subsequently traveled through Europe, the UK, Central America, Asia, and their home country of New Zealand, home- and petsitting for most of the time.

How To Find A Petsit

"We fill up our calendar with longer sits, then look for shorter sits for the gaps," Dave notes. "As animal lovers, our motivation to house and pet-sit isn't driven by any particular desire to save money, although that's certainly a handy outcome."

"We love the company of pets, but there's also the appeal of getting to know the local neighborhood, trying nearby restaurants, going to street markets, and poking around cluttered old shops."

It's usually Dave that browses the housesitting websites. "Trusted House-

sitters is the global site we started with and still use," says Dave. "But there are country-specific sites too, like [Kiwi Housesitters](#). We also get offered repeat sits, and word-of-mouth has gained us a few sits, too."

Get Five-Star Petsit Reviews

The couple jokes that they must be doing something right. "We have nothing but 5-star reviews, and we're regularly getting requests for us to come back to do repeat sits," says Christie. "It's lovely to meet up with the pets again."

To ensure those five-star reviews, Dave and Christie follow a few general guidelines. "We know our limitations, and don't take on a housesit with animals we have no experience with—for example, farm animals," says Dave. "It's very much like applying for a job. You're presenting a CV, and at some point there

is usually a call or meeting where both parties can get acquainted. If we can, we'll visit ahead of time."

Christie adds, "We're pretty good at reading between the lines. Often it's not what's said, it's what isn't said. It might be a lack of firm detail, or indecision on the terms of the sit, or avoidance of some topics—say, problematic animal behavior, or an isolated location."

At the end of a sit, they pride themselves on leaving the home immaculate, the garden tidy, and the pets happy. Because Christie loves to cook, the owners occasionally come home to a chocolate cake, hearty soups, or an easy-to-heat meal. "One home had a fantastic veggie garden, so as a small 'thank you' I blanched and froze some of their seasonal veggies so they could enjoy the fruits of their labors," says Christie. "We're firmly of the opinion that we pay our way by offering high-quality care of the home and pets, and we take that seriously."

"If we can leave the home looking as though we've never been there, that's a win, but we're very conscious that we're mostly there for the animals—really, furry family members," says Dave. "The homeowners put their trust in us to not just feed the pets, but also keep up the level of care and love that *they* give...although it's hard to hug an axolotl!" ■

"We have 5-star reviews and requests for repeat sits."



Thanks to their petsitting venture, Dave and Christie are able to travel full-time.



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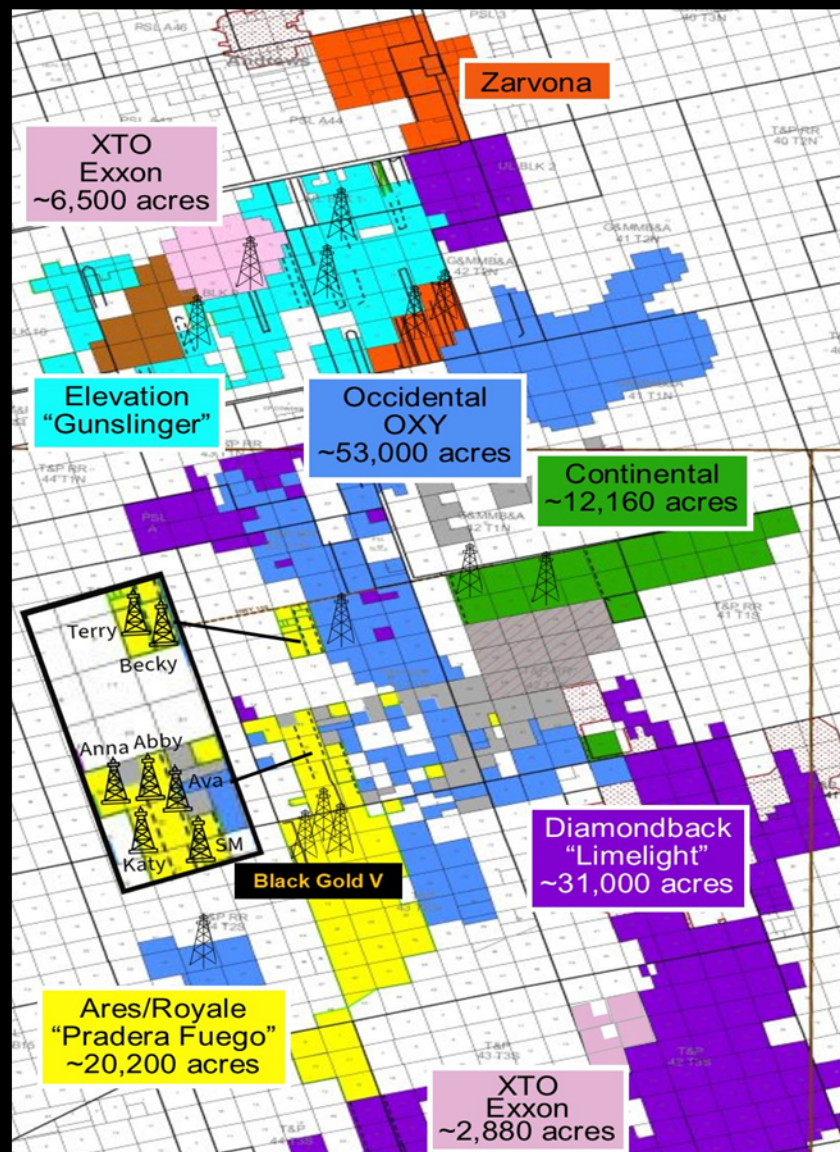
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Standing quietly in a single-file line, we inched towards the open door of a private home in **Ocotepc**, Mexico. We followed a path marked by vivid *cempasuchil* (marigold) petals, their distinctive musky scent blending with burning copal incense.

Softly flickering candles lit the way, inviting us further into the home of a family celebrating Día de los Muertos—the Day of the Dead.

I was part of a group that had traveled to **Cuernavaca**, an hour and a half south of **Mexico City**, for a unique Day of the Dead Spanish immersion tour. The lectures were daunting, but with each passing day I understood more—of both the language and the local culture.

In Mexico, the Day of the Dead is celebrated from November 1 to November 2. Day one is dedicated to loved ones who passed away recently; on day two, Mexicans visit their long-gone yet beloved relatives in cemeteries.

In Ocotepc, a small town on the fringe of Cuernavaca, day one is particularly special. Ocotepc is one of only two remaining Mexican *pueblos* that continue the ancient tradition of inviting visitors inside family homes—and on this immersion tour, I'd have the chance to partake in this practice myself.

A Homestay Sharpened My Spanish Skills—and Gifted Me a Family

During the program, students had the choice to stay at a homestay or in a hotel. I opted to stay with Lorena and Enrique, a Mexican couple who'd accommodated me in previous visits to the language school.

This lovely couple—in their 50s—are the age of my daughter. But

“Ocotepc is one of the last *pueblos* practicing an ancient Day of the Dead tradition.”

when I stay with them, they become my “Mexican parents.”

Each day, I joined them for breakfast and the mid-day main meal. Lorena's mother, Tona, often joined us. Sometimes their adult children dropped by. The

conversations at meals, always in Spanish, were lively and interesting. I was able to understand conversations that ranged from politics to

family recipes.

Lorena and Enrique always have many family pictures displayed in their home, but this was the first time I saw the *ofrenda*—offerings—that they set up for the Day of the Dead.

Most Mexican families have an *ofrenda* in their home during this annual celebration. These home shrines are tributes to long-passed loved ones, with the deceased's favorite items—think tequila, or Coca Cola—placed on the altar, enticing them to visit.



On a Spanish immersion tour in Mexico, an expat celebrates a rare Día de Los Muertos tradition.

Enter Traditional Mexico With a Day of the Dead Immersion

Ann Kuffner

Some altars also include sugar skulls. *Ceras*, or decorated candles, are also placed on and around the *ofrendas* to light the deceased's path home. With Lorena and Enrique, I got a small—and rewarding—peek at the celebrations that lay ahead.

Preparing for the Day of the Dead

The [Cuernavaca Spanish Language Institute](#) is located in the **La Parada** colonia (settlement) of the sprawling city—an attractive, safe neighborhood. The two-story school is comfortable, with gardens I sat in with my classmates. All of us were North American retirees.

We took three-hour Spanish classes, followed by workshops and lectures to prepare for the Day of the Dead. Our first task: creating a flower *corona*, the blossoms symbolizing the fragility of life.

I chose pink, purple, and orange blossoms to adorn my *corona*. In pre-Hispanic culture, we learned, the vivid orange and strong scent of marigold petals are thought to attract spirits from the other side, guiding lost ones' temporary return to earth.

As an American, I couldn't imagine



inviting anyone and everyone into my home to grieve with me. I was honored to experience this ancient tradition, especially since it was outside of my comfort zone.

Entering a Stranger's Home and Picnicking in a Graveyard

In Ocotepc, on the Day of the Dead, we followed paths of marigold petals into each home. As I reached the *ofrenda* altar, I gifted a *cera* (decorated candle) to a family member who stood nearby, greeting visitors.

In return, she offered us a cup of hot chocolate to be enjoyed outside, in a large courtyard where visitors sat and chatted. I sipped mine and soon left humbled, to be so welcomed into the home of grieving strangers.

But the second Day of the Dead took a turn. We visited the *panteon* (cemetery) expecting to find mourners, and instead found a lively party scene. This is the day Mexicans celebrate the lives of the departed—and in Ocotepc, a celebration it is.

Large families sprawled around the graves of their relatives, each grave uniquely decorated—but often including small dishes of favorite foods and flower vases. Marigold petals carpeted each grave, too. Some were also decorated with crosses and banners, or memorabilia—a rosary, toys, instruments, or a favorite cup. Families shared the deceased's

favorite food and drinks, as the scent of lit candles and burning incense wafted through the cemetery.

I witnessed families laughing, hugging, singing—and, thanks to my sharpened Spanish, sharing fond memories of their relatives.

One particular grave grabbed my attention. It had a large banner with the name “Alex.” There were pots and vases of *cempusuchils* around the grave, along with

BOOK YOUR TOUR EARLY AND STAY WITH A MEXICAN FAMILY

This immersion program was organized by the [ASLI Spanish School of Cuernavaca](#). (Each time I've studied with them, I've booked through [LangLink.com](#).)

This particular program lasted six full days, with an additional two days spent traveling to and from Cuernavaca. The 2024 Day of the Dead program runs from Tuesday, October 29 to Tuesday, November 5.

This Spanish Immersion Tour was considerably more intense than my prior weeklong studies. We were constantly on the go. Less time was dedicated to practicing grammar, given the reduced teaching hours, and more emphasis was placed on lectures, tours, and conversation. Almost all activities, tours, and classes were con-

ducted strictly in Spanish.

This type of tour would likely be most beneficial for Spanish students who are at an intermediate to advanced level, as the immersive experience will be daunting for a beginner.

The cost for this eight-day tour is \$1,300 and in 2024, it will be held from October 29 to November 5. That price is inclusive of all classes, tours, the home stay, airport/bus station pickup, and most meals. A limited number of slots are available for this popular tour; sign up and make a deposit by early summer if you're interested.

Although it's not required to stay with a family, it definitely enhances the immersion experience—just bear in mind that there are a limited number of family stay options available to students.

many candles. Eight people were tightly clustered around the grave, most under the age of 40. I couldn't help but wonder who Alex was. How old was he? What had happened to him?

All of us were careful not to interfere in the private traditions taking place around us. Still, we could feel the emotions that these families shared as they reminisced. Exiting the *panteon*, I was impressed by the townspeople's healthy approach to the death of their loved ones.

Since returning, I've noticed how these traditions impact the expats who live in Mexico. The Unitarian Universalist church I attend in San Miguel de Allende sets up an *ofrenda* each year for their Day of the Dead service, and each of us is invited to bring a picture of a loved one whom we want to remember at that service. My American friends now host an *ofrenda* in their home each Day of the Dead.

As expats, our new homes have changed us; we integrate not only the language of the country into our lives, but the country's traditions, too. ■

Ann Kuffner was previously *IL*'s Belize Correspondent. In 2018, she moved to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, where she enjoys all this *pueblo magico* has to offer.

VISIT THE ANCIENT PYRAMIDS OF A FORGOTTEN CITY

Students at the language school were able to join tours of local historic sites. The weekend before the Day of the Dead, I joined a tour of the **Teotihuacan pyramids**.

Teotihuacan, on the outskirts of Mexico City, was once a sprawling pre-hispanic city, built between the 1st and 7th centuries AD. Similar to other legendary Mesoamerican pyramid cities, it declined in the 700s AD. Its origin is shrouded in mystery.

No one knows who built this Mesoamerican city with its massive pyramids, reaching 216 feet, and designed to blend with and reflect the surrounding mountain scenery.

A number of indigenous groups lived there during the height of its power, including the Nahuatl, Otomi, Totonac, and possibly the Maya.

By the time Cortez arrived from Spain in 1519, Teotihuacan—although an impressive sight—was mostly in ruins. Still, he was reportedly amazed by its grandeur; its red pigmented pyramids shining brightly, reflecting the intense Mexican sunlight. The Aztecs living nearby assumed Cortez was the fair-skinned god Quetzalcoatl, who according to legend had departed to the east with the promise that he'd one day return from across the seas.

Face down in bathtub-warm water, my flippered feet gently kicking, I watched rainbow-colored parrotfish meander by and blue and yellow angelfish dart past, their feathery fins flapping. A small, dark blue fish with tiny electric green dots that seemed to glow from within swam an inch from my face. I found myself lost in this glistening otherworld, just me—no family, work, past, future—the ultimate escape.

This, I thought, once I'd swapped flip-flops for flip flops back on dry land, is why we vacation in the first place—to really get away. Walking on the soft white sand of **West Bay Beach** from the **Kimpton Grand Roatán**, where I'd spent two hours snorkeling, toward my Airbnb in West End, I reflected on how unusual it is to see so much right offshore when you snorkel—on many islands, you've got to take a boat out to the reef. But this intimacy with the underwater world is just one way **Roatán** distinguishes itself from its Caribbean neighbors.

If you're looking for a proper getaway, a trip to a place where you can decompress and enjoy an island that still holds on to its authentic sense of place, then sunny, postcard-perfect Roatán should be high on your list. Here are my recommendations to help you enjoy your time to the fullest.

Strategize Your Timing to Avoid the Tourist Crush

Roatán is a small Caribbean island, 45 miles from mainland Honduras and famous for its fetching beaches and world-class scuba diving. Since the early '90s, Americans, Canadians and a smattering of Europeans have traveled—and immigrated—to Roatán because of its natural beauty, mild weather, and low cost of living.

I came here to help friends celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary, and to snorkel. Roatán's northern and eastern shores are part of the Mesoamerican Reef, the largest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere. With colorful names such as **Happily Ever After** and **Mandy's Eel Garden**, hundreds of dive sites line the northern coast of the island.

There are many other must-see places—remote beaches and mangroves, in particular—but my time on Roatán

“I found myself lost in a glistening other world.”

focused on the three-mile stretch from **West Bay** to **West End**. Until you get used to them, these town names can be confusing; West Bay is at the far western end of the island, and West End is farther north, up the coast. The latter is most popular among tourists, because it's near the reef and home to many beaches, while also close to restaurants, shops, and a spectrum of lodging.

A local told me West Bay gets crazy during the middle of the week, when the cruise ships dock at **Coxen Hole** on the other side of the island, disgorging hordes of tourists. Armed with this knowledge, I returned toward the end of the week—when I experienced that transporting two-hour snorkel.

Navigating West Bay and West End

As an inlander accustomed to only deer and squirrels, the wildlife on Roatán left me in a constant state of wonder. The morning after I arrived on the island, I was woken by birds squawking outside my

cottage up the hill from [Xbalanque Resort](#), which is halfway between West Bay and West End. Something about the sound made me think they weren't ordinary. I stepped outside: Two bright red macaws were arguing high in a tree above my *casita*.

A few days later, I had a different kind of experience with the wildlife. As I walked from my Airbnb in West End to Xbalanque, I saw a bright, colorful toy or child's flip flop rolling in the surf. I decided to get the object out of the water, so I walked into the waves and kicked it onto the beach. Cool, I thought, doing my part to decrease the Texas-sized island of plastic floating around in the ocean.

The next thought I had was more of a feeling: Why does my foot sting, and why is it red?

My friends, one of whom is a veterinarian, determined I was having an allergic reaction. It didn't take much Googling to figure out that I'd kicked a Portuguese man o' war with my bare foot.

Which reminds me. You can walk between West Bay and West End, but I wouldn't recommend it. Toward West End, the trail fizzles out on rocks, and you have to billygoat it or walk in the surf. This isn't



“If you're looking for a postcard-perfect getaway, Roatán should be high on your list.”

Roatán Still Dishes Up Vintage Caribbean Appeal

Matt McGowan

safe during high tide, or if the wind is blowing in from the Caribbean. The way to West Bay is easier, but you have to cross a sketchy catwalk bridge over a canal.

Fortunately, for less than \$10, you can hail one of the water taxis that run back and forth all day between West Bay and West End. Or, if you're prone to seasickness, you can catch a cab instead, but these are more expensive—sometimes as high as \$50—and, honestly, every bit as capable of destabilizing the stomach.

Incidentally, shuttles are the best way to get around the island, including from the airport in to the popular West Bay/West End area. (You can also rent a car, but no one I talked to recommended it.)

Don't Miss the Chicken in West End

Luxury resorts and many nice Airbnbs lie between West Bay and West End. The facilities and staff at Xbalanque are impeccable, and [Ibagari](#) is one of the finest resorts I've ever seen. We dined at its restaurant, **Luna Muna**. Don't let the silly name fool you; the food there was outstanding. I won't forget the lobster risotto.

The luxury resorts are nice, but don't let the pampering and aesthetics deprive you of the magnificent beach at West Bay and the grit and flavor of West End.

West End is gritty—still quite touristy, but more like the real Roatán. It doesn't have the world-class beach that West Bay

boasts, but it does have a mini-reef, at **Half Moon Bay**, that can be accessed by simply walking into the ocean.

You might assume seafood reigns here, but it's actually chicken that the islanders have perfected. I've eaten my share of chicken, but I've never tasted anything like the jerk at [Anthony's Chicken and More](#). The meat was falling off the bone. This modest restaurant smells so good that the meal begins as soon as you walk in the door... which they leave wide open during business hours. Probably their evil plan to lure you in. If you can't find a seat at Anthony's, don't despair. There are several street vendors nearby serving the same jerk style. You'll spot them by the people lined up to buy.

I'd been told to go to [Sandy Buns](#), across from Half Moon Bay, where Texan Tim Dolan specializes in biscuits (get the jalapeño), brisket and, of course, cinnamon buns. For ten bucks, I had The Bob breakfast sandwich, a large cinnamon roll, and coffee. I'm not too proud to admit that I ate the entire roll, which made me feel like I needed to swim to Jamaica or take a late-morning nap.

Sandy Bun's menu is rotating (don't worry—the cinnamon rolls are almost always on the menu) and Brayden, my neighbor during my stay in the West End, said that when Sandy Buns makes brownies, all the locals rush down there and buy them out.

Meeting Roatán's Mascot

I was walking toward Xbalanque to meet my friends celebrating their anniversary. This couple loves horses and horse-racing, so I thought it was fitting when I bumped into one on their special day.

The horse was standing in the water on **Luna Beach**, a short walk down from West End. On a previous walk, I'd seen where this horse lived, a small stable that offers rides on the beach. Guides were preparing the horses for a ride, which was why this horse was allowed to wander. He was standing in the water on Luna Beach, a short walk down from West End.

I stopped and took a few pictures, which I decided to send to my horse-loving friends, along with a congratulatory text... after I went for a swim, as I couldn't resist the beautiful blue water in front of me. When I returned to the beach, I sat on a chunk of driftwood and composed a congratulatory message to my friends.

Then I felt something lightly touch my back. Slowly, I turned around. The horse had returned... to nuzzle my spine.

Later, I thought of the horse as a kind of mascot or ambassador for Roatán, a symbol of the kindness and gentleness of its people. ■

Matt McGowan is a science writer and former newspaper reporter. He has published one novel and a short story collection.

TRAVEL TIPS FOR YOUR VISIT TO ROATÁN

Best time to visit: Roatán is equatorial, so the weather doesn't change much with the seasons, but many people prefer spring, when turtles nest and the weather is more consistent.

Transportation and logistics: Unless you're on a cruise ship, visitors to Roatán fly into Coxen Hole, the island's largest town. While small, Juan Manuel Galvez International Airport (RTB) can accommodate 737s and receives direct flights from Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth, Atlanta, Miami, Denver, Minneapolis and Toronto.

The airport's website is an excellent source of information, specifically about ground transportation and water taxis. To

avoid scams or excessive rates, you'll want to look for the white cars with yellow decals and numbers. These are official cabs and, as such, should adhere to the standard cab fares, which are posted on the site and in the airport. You can also pre-book a taxi on the airport's website.

Stay at: [Luna Beach](#), [Xbalanque](#), or [Ibagari Boutique Hotel](#) for resort experiences.

Cash is king: Taxis and cabs are inexpensive. You'll want to carry some small bills to pay for them. Many restaurants and stores accept credit cards, but generally—especially if it's a local mom and pops store—include a service charge of a couple bucks. Several do not

accept them, period. In lieu of cash, many restaurants, including Sandy Buns, use cash apps such as Venmo and Paypal.

Diving and snorkeling: A plethora of diving and snorkeling guides can be found in West End and West Bay. These shops accommodate all skill levels. Only a short walk from the luxury resorts between West End and West Bay, Clearwater Adventures Dive and Snorkel was excellent and inexpensive.

How to be a local, fast: Order *Salva Vida*, Honduras' national beer, or a *Monkey Lala*, which is basically a chocolate milkshake with four kinds of alcohol.

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Above, le Jardin Majorelle in Marrakesh—one of this global-savvy duo's top recommendations.

Tokyo, Marrakesh, or Bali? Where to Go With Mom

Maria DiCicco

As a child, my mother and father took me on adventures around the globe—from Japan to the “end of the earth” in Ushuaia, Argentina.

Travel is as second nature to me as driving my four-year-old daughter to school in the morning. If you're thinking of treating your mother to an adventure this Mother's Day (or any day), I've got the best places around the globe to go—even if one (or both) of you isn't as mobile as you used to be.

For Foodies & Bargain Shoppers: Tokyo

When my mom booked a cruise to Japan and invited my four-year-old daughter and me along for the ride, I agreed... hesitantly. My mom can't use chopsticks, exclusively drinks wine (no *sake* or beer for her!), and shies away from any foods that are raw or too offbeat. I worried I'd miss out on experiences like *okonomiyaki* (savory pancakes) in **Asakusa**, where sitting on the floor with no shoes is the only option.

But, as our cruise traveled from port to port, Mom ate everything, went everywhere I suggested, and even sat on the floor chugging cold beers in the hot *okonomiyaki* restaurant I'd had on my

bucket list. She ate raw oysters with me at the **Shimizu** fish market, and the *kushikatsu* (deep-fried skewers) in **Osaka**. We crushed the **Shinsaibashi-suji** shopping street in Osaka, and she begged to try the raw tuna (*katsuo tataki*) at the **Hirome Ichiba** market in **Kochi**. She made me laugh at her non-negotiable request for peking duck in **Yokohama's Chinatown**.

One of our favorite pastimes together is the kind of bargain-hunting **Tokyo's** known for. We skipped the tourist sites and got right to the important stuff: finding a 100 yen shop, run by the chain **Daiso** (basically, an upscale dollar store). I'd mapped several locations before boarding my flight, along with a handful of similar stores like **Seria** and the **3 Coins** store.

Finding Daiso stores became almost a scavenger hunt, as we found they were hidden in the most unique places: on segmented levels of open-air shopping malls, or accessed only through highway tunnels,

“Marrakesh for photography, food, and the romance of French roots.”

and so forth.

We were fiends for it and squealed quite literally in glee upon every sighting. We found Japanese gadgets and *kawaii* “cuteness” everywhere. (Later, I had to buy extra luggage just to take home our tiny souvenirs.) Hands down, we did the most damage in Tokyo and the South Korean port of **Busan** at these inexpensive stores.

The joy we had shopping together, laughing and haggling gave us great pleasure—and many memories.

For Photography Buffs: Marrakesh

Chefchaouen, in north Morocco, is famous for its homes painted in blues of every hue. Photographers travel there *just* to stroll the baby blue and royal streets. But travel south to **Marrakesh**, and you'll find it's another blue-hued gem.

This is a destination perfect for mothers with grown children—especially those entranced with photography, gastronomy, and the romance of North Africa's French roots.

As a woman in Morocco I never once felt unsafe or mistreated, ever. That said, it's important to dress conservatively to show respect for the culture. Wear a headscarf in religious places (a simple shawl wrapped over your head is fine), and keep shoulders and thighs covered.

I recommend making the **Jemaa El Fna** square your home base in the city; stay at the **Riad Laila**, a 10-minute walk away. In the evening, the square teems with life, from the shuffle of Spanish and French

tourists haggling with shop owners, to hawkers trying to make one last sale for the day. Spices waft through smoke-filled air, a byproduct of the succulent lamb and *merguez* sausages sizzling on open-flame grills in the square. Street

performers and snake charmers gather crowds under patio string lights, playing carnivalesque games with locals as tourists watch.

From here, explore shops on foot. Be aware that haggling is expected, so never settle on the first price you hear. An earnest interest met with a sudden aloofness is the perfect combination for dealing with a shop vendor.

I haggled hard for a silver and gold ring I wanted on my last visit. I must have left

the shop three times, like a fish on a hook pulled back for one more nibble at the prize. He had me, I had him, but it took a solid 10 minutes of “will they, won’t they” before I got my silver and gold ring for a modest \$13—down from triple digits.

You can get frame-worthy photos of the stunning marble tiles at the **Saadian Tombs**, **El Badi Palace**, and **Palais de la Bahia**. Commissioned by sultans, these grand labyrinthine sites are a testament to the powerful nation that once resisted even the Ottoman Empire.

Photography lovers will want to add a stop at the **Ibn Youssef School** or the **House of Photography** for additional opportunities to peek behind the lens. And don’t leave without a trip to see **Majorelle Gardens**, famously a place of inspiration for French fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent. The gardens drip in blue hues, like much of the Arabian city.

I’ve enjoyed French-inspired cuisine à la Bogart’s Casablanca at [Bagatelle](#) or [La Grand Café de la Poste](#) in the neighborhood of **Gueliz**. For an authentically Moroccan meal, opt for rooftop lunches of *kefta tagines* (think lamb shakshuka) and couscous. Or, get a temporary tattoo alongside your meal at the [Henna Art Cafe](#).

Only a few days are needed to explore this city. From Marrakesh, many nearby side trips await—like seaside **Essaouira**, the appealing port city known for kitesurfing, a reasonable three-hour bus ride away.

For Beach Lovers: Bali

Imagine Hawaii, pair it with jungle adventure from Indiana Jones, pepper in the romance of temple dances at sunset, fish markets, flame-grilled seafood on the sands of local beaches, folklore shows, night markets and fish spas... and you’ve got the ingredients for a relaxing vacation with your mother.

For the duo that enjoys gastronomy, the cuisine is unmatched and best enjoyed in *palapa* (open-air) restaurants or cooking classes. In the fish spas, peoplewatch and let tiny tetra fish nibble at—and exfoliate—your feet, or get a massage and pedicure for a fraction of the cost you’d see at home.

Set up shop in the **Nusa Dua** region in the south of Bali, or **Sanur**, a mere 20-minute drive from the airport, for the best beach hotels and waterfront restaurants, if you’d like to prioritize beachgoing. If

you’re more into the jungle temples and monkey forests, venture inland to **Ubud**.

Wander art markets at **Kuta**, or the fish market in **Jimbaran**. See the stunning sea-side **Tanah Lot temple**, and at dusk, visit the **Uluwatu temple** for the traditional *kecak* dance with the backdrop of a fiery setting sun.

For the more adventurous, go scuba diving on the island of **Gili Trawangan**, famed for its crystal-clear waters and colorful coral reefs. Accessible only by a small water taxi from Bangsal Port, the island is home to dive shops galore and pedestrian-only streets. The only way to get around is on foot—or by horse-drawn carriage.

Once there, indulge in *mie goreng* or *nasi goreng*, national specialties made with rice or noodles, watermelon juice, and banana pancakes. It sounds like a Jack Johnson song, and Bali feels like one, too.

For the Guidebook Gurus: Go To Rome... But Beware

My mom and I have had our fair share of misadventures in our travels. But the mugging in Rome takes the cake.

I was eight, and Dad was patting his jean pockets in a panic. His wallet was gone. My father and brother darted off the train following one of the guilty-looking suspects who took off in a sprint; my mother and aunt darted in the opposite direction following the other guilty-looking cohort. When I caught up to them, both Mom and Dad had the suspected thieves against the subway walls.

Rome is a massive metropolis full of tourists, and that comes with its downsides. If Rome is on your must-see list, I suggest avoiding tourist traps and the overhyped Tripadvisor *trattorias*.

Instead, focus your efforts on lesser-known sites like the **Ostia Antica**, a complex similar to that of Pompeii, where you can witness ancient streets, bakeries, and buildings just minutes from Rome on the train. Or back in the city, catch an intimate showing of *La Traviata* or another opera, often played at **St. Pauls Within the Walls** church.

The **Basilica di San Clemente al Laterano** is an architectural wonder—a layer cake of three different churches built one on top of the other. Journey deep into the earth to see how the centuries changed them, and when you’re done, further

ITINERARY AT A GLANCE

Marrakesh

Stay at: Riad Laila or [Riad Zarka](#)

Dine at: Jemaa el Fna square, [Dar Esselam](#), [Bagatelle](#)

Don’t Miss: Saadians Tombs, El Badi Palace

Visit for: Three nights

Tokyo

Stay at: [Edo Sakura Ryokan](#)

Dine at: Asakusa Okonomiyaki Sometaro (Open 12–2:45 p.m. and 5:30–8:15 p.m. Be sure to line up before opening time or you’ll wait.)

Don’t Miss: Enoshima Island

Visit for: 1 week

Bali

Stay at: [Courtyard Bali Nusa Dua Resort](#), or [Mango Dive & Bungalows](#) in Gili Trawangan

Dine at: [Menega Cafe](#)

Don’t Miss: Tanah Lot Temple, Uluwatu Temple with Sunset Dance

Visit for: 1 week

Rome

Stay at: [St. Regis Rome](#) or [Hotel Canada](#)

Eat at: [Ristorante Nerone al Viminale](#)

Don’t Miss: Ostia Antica. Basilica di San Clemente al Laterano

Visit for: Three nights

explore the dark underground world at the catacombs of **San Callisto** or **San Sebastiano**. Rest assured, Rome can be marvelous.

If you’d like to treat Mom, bring her to the [St. Regis](#) for the incredible service and ornate marble trappings, their nightly champagne sabering ceremony, and their creative cocktails. Stay a few nights and enjoy the lap of luxury, setting out at night to local restaurants found only by sniffing your way.

If you want to see Rome in its truest form—the one you hope to see when you book that plane ticket—throw the guide book out. ■

Writer, wife to a Spaniard, and mother to a four-year-old, **Maria DiCicco** spends her time captivating readers with tales of her travels at [alwayspacktissues.com](#).

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An aerial photograph of Panama City, Panama, at sunset. The image shows a dense urban landscape with numerous high-rise buildings, including the prominent Torre Paine. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, indicating the time is either dawn or dusk. The city lights are beginning to glow, and the water of the bay is visible in the lower left. The overall mood is professional and modern.

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